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*Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab**

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Abstract

Given different socio-economic structures, and acute landlessness among the Dalits of East Punjab, the agendas of conversion to neo-Buddhism and sanskritisation, the two most popular Dalit social mobility models in India, have failed to strike a cord among the Dalits in this border state of northwest India. But that does not imply that Dalits of Punjab have failed in improving their social status. On the contrary, they have been very vocal in their assertions for social justice and dignity, and pressing for a due share in the local structures of power; a clear indication of a significant surge of Dalit social mobility in Punjab. The question that still remains largely unexplored, however, relates to the patterns of Dalit social mobility in Punjab that have emerged independently of the agendas of conversion to neo-Buddhism and sanskritisation. The study aims to map out the contours of an emerging alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab, which is conspicuous by its absence in existing Dalit studies, and examines its catalytic role in enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of increasingly visible Dalit social mobility in the state. The paper concludes by visualising the possibility of an articulation and assertion of a similar alternative Dalit agenda through highly contentious democratic politics in other parts of India, where the archetypical agendas of conversion and sanskritisation have either failed to deliver social justice and dignity or could not simply appeal to the local Dalit population.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of social mobility in India has often been seen through the prism of two major Dalit[1] agendas: conversion[2] and sanskritisation.[3] It is generally believed that Dalits make use of one or other of these two agendas[4] to escape caste-based discriminations and

[1] The 'Dalit' is a broad term that incorporates the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and the Backward Castes. However, in the current political discourse, it is mainly confined to the Scheduled Castes (formerly Untouchables) and covers only those Dalits who are classified as Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists but excludes Muslim and Christian Dalits.

[2] Conversion has been a common practice among Dalits in India to evade the monster of untouchability. Though conversion implies denouncing one's parent religion and embracing any other one, in the present study the term 'conversion agenda' is used specifically for conversion to Buddhism only. Conversion to religions other than that of Buddhism has neither been collective nor based on a well-planned strategy. It had always been a matter of individual protest against the inhuman treatment meted out to ex-Untouchables by the caste Hindus. The case of conversion to Buddhism, however, is entirely different. It was a thoroughly investigated and well-calculated collective move headed by Ambedkar (1891–1956), a messiah of the downtrodden and architect of the Constitution of independent India, who deployed it as a viable mode of Dalit social mobility. It is against this backdrop that in the present study 'conversion agenda' implies conversion to Buddhism only. For a detailed account of Buddhist conversion see, Jayashree B. Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change: The Buddhist conversion of Maharashtrian Untouchables', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1986, Vol. XLV, No. 2, February, pp. 269–292; Johannes Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005; Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz, (eds), *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[3] 'Sanskritization may be briefly defined as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (*dwija*) caste. The Sanskritization of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy' (M. N. Srinivas, *Village, Caste, Gender and Method: Essays in Indian Social Anthropology*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 (Paperback), p. 88). See also: M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952; M. N. Srinivas, 'A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization', *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 1956, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 481–96; J. F. Staal, 'Sanskrit and Sanskritization', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1963, Vol. XXII, No. 3, May, pp. 261–75; A. M. Shah, 'Sanskritisation Revisited'. *Sociological Bulletin*, 2005, Vol. 54, No. 2, May–August, pp. 238–249 ; Nirmal Singh, 'Discussion: Some Comments on 'Sanskritisation Revisited'. *Sociological Bulletin*, 2006, Vol. 55, No. 1, January–April, pp. 108–112; A. M. Shah, 'Some Further Thoughts on Sanskritisation: Response to Nirmal Singh's Rejoinder', *Sociological Bulletin*, 2006, Vol. 55, No. 1, January–April, pp. 112–117.

[4] Conversion and sanskritisation are described as 'agendas' because of the objective (improving social status) for which they are being deployed. They may be described as 'processes', but the term agenda, I think, better explains these 'processes', which are purposely made use of for achieving upward social mobility. It is in this sense that conversion and sanskritisation become agendas.

social exclusion which has been forced upon them by the oppressive Hindu social order for centuries.[5] The question that still remains largely unexplored is how far these agendas are really capable of explaining the entire gamut of ongoing Dalit social mobility in India. Or, do we need some alternative agenda to map the complex and mercurial nature of social mobility among Dalits across the country marked by wide ranging regional diversities and varied social hierarchies? This paper is a modest attempt in this regard, focusing on Punjab as its critical case study.

Let me clarify at the outset the context of the universe of this study. First, though conversion and sanskritisation have been taken up as the two main modes of Dalit social mobility in India, it does not imply at all that these are the only ways to explain such mobility. No doubt there exist a number of ways to approach and elucidate the issue of Dalit social mobility in the country including East Punjab. However, one of the main reasons behind focusing on conversion and sanskritisation in this study relates to the fact that they are widely discussed in social science research on this subject in India and abroad. The central focus of the study remains on examining the emerging patterns of an alternative agenda of Dalit social mobility in Punjab. This emerging agenda is popularly known by several names such as Ad/Adi/Sant Dharm, Ravidassism, Ravidass Dharm, Guru Ravidass movement or Ravidass Deras movement. It is argued that what distinguishes the alternative Dalit agenda from conversion and sanskritisation is that it gives expression to the native religion and heritage of the Punjabi Dalits as indigenous inhabitants of the land, without inducing them to get assimilated into the dominant regional cultural patterns or to convert to another religious faith. The adherence to Ad Dharm or the cult of Ravidass is neither a case of conversion nor of sanskritisation. On the contrary, it can be characterized as a case of Dalit homecoming as well as a radical mode of Dalit social protest.

Second, despite the oppressive practice of untouchability being declared a criminal offence under the constitution of Independent India and under various other acts passed subsequently, it has been able to survive in various subtle forms given the complex social stratification in the country. It continues to dehumanize and humiliate Dalits even 60 years after India's independence. And the Dalits continue to struggle hard against their social exclusion

[5] For details see: Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage, 1994, Chapters 3 and 4.

while fighting for long denied human rights, dignity and identity. Punjab is no exception, even though it has long boasted a caste-free society.

Third, social status in Punjab, primarily an agrarian state, is basically measured in terms of possession of land; a currency of power and prestige. Almost all the land in Punjab is under the control of the dominant/upper castes. Dalits, to a large extent, are absolutely landless. Moreover, there is a general prejudice prevalent among the dominant/upper castes against Dalits in Punjab, that prevents the former from selling land to the latter, thus rendering them 'hopelessly' landless forever. Members of the dominant castes often consider it below their prestige to sell land to Dalits. During a fracas among members of a dominant caste it is common to hear one party threatening the other by saying that it will sell land/house to a low caste so as to fix the opponent by compelling him/her to 'live with' a low-caste neighbour. During my field work it came to my notice that although some of the Dalits can afford to buy land, due to such prejudices they find it hard to locate a potential seller among dominant castes. In Punjab it is social taboo among dominant castes to sell land to Dalits, which is indeed a unique form of social exclusion.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides a brief account of the conversion and sanskritisation agendas and how they have been received and responded to in Punjab. The second section offers a synoptic view of the emerging alternative Dalit agenda and outlines the rationale behind choosing Punjab for the case study. In the third section, a detailed discussion about the Ravidass phenomenon and the crucial role it continues to play in facilitating the emergence of an alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab is presented. The role that the Ad Dharm movement of Punjab has played in chiseling the distinct markers of this alternative agenda is the key concern of the fourth section. The last section outlines the contemporary state-of-affairs of the alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab. Who benefits from and who is disadvantaged by this agenda, and what conflicts of interest it gives rise to are also discussed in this section.

This paper is the outcome of my ethnographic research based on participant observation and open-ended conversations with a large number of Dalit leaders, activists, intellectuals, followers of Guru Ravidass, and priests of various Ravidass shrines, conducted during the eight years 2001–2009, both in Punjab (particularly in the

Doaba region)[6] and abroad (especially among the Punjabi Dalit diaspora in the United States and Canada). The paper has also drawn on hitherto relatively ignored but quite significant popular Dalit literature, scattered in the form of speeches, booklets, leaflets, handouts, pamphlets, posters, calendars, bhajans (devotional songs), idioms, aphorisms, poems and songs about the phenomenon of Ravidass and the Ad Dharm movement, the two main factors behind the emergence of the alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab.

Conversion and sanskritisation problematique

Rooted in the radical philosophy of the Satyashodhak movement[7], the Buddhist conversion agenda has aimed at Dalit emancipation through 'unequivocal rejection of Hinduism'.[8] It is based on the premise that Hinduism contained the seeds of social exclusion, which prompted the upper castes to perpetrate atrocities on Dalits by enlisting support from the oppressive declarations of Hindu sacred texts known as Vedas, Upanishads, Dharamsastras, Smritis, Puranas, and the Epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. This agenda, argues Jayashree B. Gokhale, '...was intended to be a counter-ideology that would combat the penetration of *varna*,[9] offer an alternative interpretation of the situation of the Untouchables, and provide a basis on which they could unite politically'.[10] It severs ties with all the social and political organization of the upper castes, and accords no place whatsoever even to the popular bhakti (devotional mode of veneration) movement, which is often eulogised as a unique movement for the emancipation of Dalits.[11] The objective of the Buddhist conversion was to restore a sense of self-respect, dignity, and autonomy of Dalits who had been reduced to the status of mere 'objects of ideological condemnation

[6] Indian Punjab is divided into three distinct cultural regions: Majha, Malwa and Doaba. Rivers mark the boundaries of these three distinct regions. Over time, each region has come to acquire specific social, economic and cultural patterns. The Doaba region, lying between the rivers of Sutlej and Beas, comprised four districts of Punjab: Nawanshahar, Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar.

[7] Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, p. 112.

[8] Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 141.

[9] Literally colour, it referred to the four-fold division of Hindu society based on occupational categories. However, with the passage of time, it degenerated into a rigid caste system without any channel of upward social mobility.

[10] Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', p. 272.

[11] Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, p. 113.

and material servitude', and were deprived of bare minimum human existence for centuries.[12]

Aimed at empowering Dalits to confront and contest the superstitious and oppressive Brahminical social order, this agenda was designed by none other than Dr B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) who along with thousands of his followers, mainly from his own Mahar caste[13] in Maharashtra, converted to Buddhism at the historic public ceremony in Nagpur on 14 October 1956.[14] The decision of Ambedkar to embrace Buddhism was not at all a precipitous occurrence.[15]

In fact, it was a unique and meticulously calculated move.[16] It took him more than two decades[17] to translate his vow for conversion

[12] Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', p. 270. See also: Janet A. Contursi, 'Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 1993, Vol. 52, No. 2, May, pp. 321–322.

[13] An Untouchable caste mainly of village servants.

[14] The Nagpur conversion ceremony turned out to be an extraordinary event in the sense that it was a collective exercise, which gave concrete shape to the fast emerging phenomenon of radical Dalit consciousness in the country since then. Whereas conversions to other religions in India '. . .were largely matters of individual choice. . .'. For details see: Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', p. 273; Johannes Beltz, 'Introduction', in Jondhale and Beltz, (eds), *Reconstructing the World,* p. 1.

[15] Ambedkar decided to embrace Buddhism after thoroughly exhausting all possible ways of reforming Hinduism from within and exploring the possibility of conversion to Christianity, Sikhism, and Islam for overcoming the oppressive structures of Varna order in India. He embraced Buddhism because of its emphasis on the equality of all human beings irrespective of birth and occupation, and its being '. . .truly Indian. . .equalitarian, universalistic, ethical, and rationalist' (Gail Omvedt, 'Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism: B. R. Ambedkar's Sociology of Religion and Indian Society', in Jondhale and Beltz (eds), *Reconstructing the World*, p. 54). For more details see: Contursi, 'Political Theology', pp. 321–322; Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, 3rd edn, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1971, particularly chapter XXVI; Beltz, 'Introduction', p. 1.

[16] The Buddhist conversion of 1956 was unique in the sense that although there have been many instances of individual conversion to Buddhism, the real credit for systematically organizing collective conversions on a mass scale in India, beyond doubt, goes to Ambedkar. Pandit C. Ayodhya Dasa (1845–1914), better known as Iyothee Thaas, a Tamil Siddha physician and pioneer of the Tamil Buddhist movement, took *diksha* (initiation) at the hands of a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka and founded the Sakya Buddhist Society (also known as Indian Buddhist Association) in 1890. Dharmanand Kosambi, Rahul Sankrityayan, Anand Kausalyayan and Jagdish Kashyap are some other famous instances of individual conversion to Buddhism in India. For more details see: Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', p. 269; Eleanor Zelliot, 'B. R. Ambedkar and the Search for a Meaningful Buddhism', in Jondhale and Beltz (eds), *Reconstructing the World*, pp.19–24; Beltz, 'Introduction', p. 1; Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*.

[17] From Yeola Conference, 13 October 1935, where he took the vow that 'even though I am a Hindu born, I will not die a Hindu', to the historic Nagpur conversion

into a viable system of neo-Buddhism/Navayana Buddhism, or what is also appropriately called the 'Fourth Way' (in contrast to the three traditional ways of Hinyana, Mahayana and Vajrayana[18]) which, he believed, would usher in an egalitarian social order free from the hierarchies of *savarnas* (upper castes) and *avarnas* (lower castes). The historic conversion ceremony at Nagpur assumed further importance with the posthumous publication of Ambedkar's *magnum opus*, 'The Buddha and his Dhamma',[19] which transformed Dalit Buddhists/ neo-Buddhists into what Brian Stock has perceptively described as a 'textual community'.[20] This classic text by Ambedkar eventually acquired the status of the Bible or the Koran for the neo-Buddhists,[21] who perceived it as an icon of their distinct social identity.

Ambedkar discovered in his conversion to Buddhism the most desired and reliable way of overcoming the centuries-old system of untouchability. The central thesis of the Buddhist philosophy, according to Ambedkar, revolves around two major problems: 'the first problem was that there was suffering in the world and the second was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy'.[22] Since untouchability, dehumanizes the Dalits, resulting in extreme suffering, Ambedkar underlined the urgency of its total annihilation. It is in this context that the adoption of 'action-oriented Buddhism'[23] by Ambedkar needs to be understood. It aimed at the realization of following two interrelated objectives: (i) annihilation of caste

ceremony, 14 October 1956, the day he embraced Buddhism with thousands of his followers. For details see, Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, pp. 251–265, 498–504; Zelliot, 'B. R. Ambedkar and the Search for a Meaningful Buddhism', pp. 18–19; Gary Michael Tartakov, 'The Navayana Creation of the Buddha Image' in Jondhale and Beltz (eds), *Reconstructing the World,* pp. 151–185; cf. Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, p. 152.

[18] Gail Omvedt, 'Liberty, Equality, Community: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's Vision of a New Social Order', *Fourth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture,* New Delhi, Dr Ambedkar Chair in Sociology, CSSS, JNU, 2004, p. 22. See also, Harish S Wankhede, 'The Political and Social in the Dalit Movement Today', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 9 February, 2008, p. 52.

[19] B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Bombay: Siddharath College (Publication, No. I), 1957. Ambedkar died in December 1956. He finished the manuscript of this classic in February 1956 and was in the process of giving it final touches at the time of his death on 6th December.

[20] Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 88–240.

[21] Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 93.

[22] Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 55.

[23] Contursi, 'Political Theology', p. 323.

and (ii) reconstruction of a new society based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.[24] Since annihilation of caste and reconstruction of an egalitarian social order go hand-in-hand, the agenda of Buddhist conversion did not imply desertion of Indian society at all.[25] On the contrary, as pointed out by Janet A. Contursi, Ambedkar rather 'wanted Untouchables to reject the Hindu Social order without forfeiting their Indian cultural heritage, and he saw in Buddhism a rational and moral ethic that would challenge the obscurantist elements of Hinduism and provide a philosophy of action for Untouchables'.[26] Thus Ambedkar's call for the withdrawal of Dalits from Hinduism did not imply dissociation from 'the wider Indian civil society'.[27] In fact, it underlined their entry into the 'political' in the country by redefining and reconstituting their relationship with the non-Brahminical segments of the Indian society. Critically exploring the logic behind the historic Dalit conversion at Nagpur, Gauri Vishwanathan argues that, 'If Ambedkar exhorted [U]ntouchables to leave Hinduism for cultural self-renewal, he conceived of that departure not as a withdrawal into an autonomous space but as a prerequisite to reclaiming India as the nation from which Untouchables had been severed by political disenfranchisement'.[28] It is against this backdrop that neo-Buddhism placed Dalit Buddhists in a strategic opposition to the oppressive Hindu culture, and aimed at providing them with a distinct social and cultural identity precisely within a reclaimed, reformed Indian society.[29]

Conversion to Buddhism encourages strategic alliance between the non-Brahminical/Shudras/Bahujan Samaj/artisans and the Dalit/Atishudras sections of Indian society and calls for their united front against the oppressive and hegemonic structures of Brahminical social order. As argued by Jayashree B. Gokhale, Buddhist conversion 'was a means for the unification of those who had been exploited

[24] B. R. Ambedkar, *Budhha and the Future of His Religion*. Jullundur: Bheem Patrika Publication, 1980, pp. 4–5 (originally published in *The Maha Bodhi*, April–May 1950); Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp, 'From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidas and Ambedkar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 June, 2007, p. 2179; Beltz, 'Introduction', p. 4.

[25] A. M. Shah, 'Sanskritisation Revisited', p. 244.

[26] Contursi, 'Political Theology', p. 322.

[27] Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement*, pp. 171, 229.

[28] Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold : Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, New Jersey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 238–239 ; cf. Debjani Ganguly, 'Buddha, *bhakti* and superstition: a post-secular reading of dalit conversion', *Postcolonial Studies* (Routledge), 2004, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 50.

[29] Contursi, 'Political Theology', p. 322.

and oppressed by the *varna* order.... Its acceptance by all those who stood in a similar class position regardless of caste could result in a powerful coalition capable of challenging the established structure'.[30] Forging unity among the victims of the '*varna* order' in turn aimed at reclaiming India on the basis of the neo-Buddhist identity. The very fact that Dr Ambedkar founded three political parties (the Independent Labour Party, All India Scheduled Castes Federation and the Republican Party of India), and the leading role that he played in drafting the Constitution of independent India, vindicated his active involvement in the polity and society of the country even after denouncing Hinduism publicly in1935 and later on embracing Buddhism in 1956.[31]

However, in the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement in India, the Buddhist conversion agenda achieved only partial success.[32] It could not succeed in germinating an all-India inclusive counter-ideology contesting the well-entrenched birth/caste-based system of social exclusion. Although at the individual level, and in specific terms of the Mahar-Buddhist community, this agenda has been presented 'as a major success', but its collective impact turned out to be 'the opposite of what was intended'.[33] It has not only added a new Dalit community to the already existing long list of Dalit castes in India, but has also sharpened the phenomenon of caste hierarchy within Dalits. Moreover, it further failed to salvage the newly created distinct Mahar-Buddhist community from the typical discriminatory and oppressive regimes of social stratification epitomized by Brahmins.[34]

Sanskritisation is another equally popular Dalit agenda that promises social mobility among the downtrodden by making them emulate the cultural patterns of the caste Hindus. This agenda expects Dalits to indulge in self-purification by introducing Sanskritic reforms such as 'adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon'.[35] Drawing sustenance from the bhakti and various other reform movements, the sanskritisation

[30] Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', p. 272.

[31] The formation of the Independent Labour Party in 1936 and the Republican Party of India in 1957 aimed to provide an alternative political platform for the downtrodden to contest the hegemonic Varna ideology of Brahminical Hinduism.

[32] Beltz, 'Introduction', pp. 11–12; see also Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', p. 272; Wankhede, 'The Political and the Social', pp. 52–53.

[33] Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', p. 272–273.

[34] Ibid., p. 279.

[35] Srinivas, 'A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization', p. 481.

agenda requires Dalits to forget their distinct social identity and recast it in the image of savarnas. Despite its promise to mitigate the adverse impact of caste on Dalits, sanskritisation tends to 'provide an upgrading and 'modernization' of high-caste domination'.[36] Thus sanskritisation reinforces the structural logic of Hinduism by asking Dalits to internalize the very same social system that they would like to contest in the first place. In fact, it forces them to imbibe outmoded cultural patterns of the upper castes without seeking any radical change in the centuries-old hierarchical and most oppressive structures of Brahminical social order.

It is in the context discussed above that the agenda of sanskritisation too has failed to liberate Dalits from the clutches of the oppressive Brahminical social order. Instead of ensuring emancipation and autonomy, it pleaded more for the 'assimilation or integration' of the socially excluded sections of Indian society. It did not intend to bring about what Srinivas describes as a 'structural change' in the hegemonic caste order in the country. On the contrary, it forced Dalits to live with just 'positional changes' in the Brahminical social order under the paternalistic leadership of caste Hindus.[37] The agenda of sanskritisation, originally introduced among the *Nadars* or *Shanars* of Travancore and Tamil country in the first third of the nineteenth century, and still in operation in the form of a 'behavioural self-improvement movement' among the socially excluded, perhaps accounts for the most significant manifestation of Dalit social mobility during the first two decades of the twentieth century.[38] But since sanskritisation has its inbuilt limitations in overcoming the structures of the oppressive Brahminical social order, it failed to expand as an effective agency of social change among the Dalits in India.

Conversion and sanskritisation in Punjab

Whatever little success the agendas of Buddhist conversion and sanskritisation might have had in certain parts of the country, they

[36] Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, pp. 90, 112.

[37] M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p. 7.

[38] Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 78. See also Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution—The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India,* New Delhi: Permanent, 2003, Part II, Chapters 5–7.

have failed to replicate in Punjab. Nevertheless, Punjab has its own story of conversion, primarily to Sikhism[39] and Christianity.[40] Contrary to their high expectations, conversion to Sikhism and Christianity in Punjab has failed to liberate Dalits from the abyss of untouchability.[41] As far as Dalit conversion to Christianity is concerned, it remains confined primarily to Chuhra caste, one of the most numerical castes among the Dalits of Punjab. Even among the

[39] Dalit conversion to Sikhism mainly attracted by its egalitarian philosophy. Massive Dalit conversion to Sikhism begins with the 4th Master, Guru Ramdass which intensified during the Guruship of the 6th (Guru Hargobind) and the 10th (Guru Govind Singh) Masters. Dalit Sikhs are divided into two segments. The first comprises Mazhbis and Rangretas whose hereditary profession was primarily scavenging. They were originally of the Chuhra caste (sweepers). After conversion to Sikhism they came to be known as Mazhbis and Rangretas. The other segment of Dalit Sikhs consists of Ramdassias. They were Julahas (Weavers) before their conversion to Sikhism. Ramdassias are often confused with Ravidassias. Though probably of the same origin, they are separated by their distinct occupations. Despite the egalitarian stance of Sikh theology, meticulously preserved in the holy text (Guru Granth Sahib) of the Sikh faith, the evil of caste discrimination seeped slowly into the panth (organization/community of the Sikh religion). For a detailed account of the caste system among Sikhs see: Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes* [a reprint of the chapter on 'Races, Castes and Tribes of the People' in the Report on the Census of the Panjab 1881], Punjab Language Department, 1883, rpt. 1970; Ethne K. Marenco, *The Transformation of Sikh society*, New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1976; Harish K. Puri, 'Scheduled Caste in Sikh Community: A Historical Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2003, Vol. 38, No. 26, June 28, pp. 2693–2701; W. H. McLeod, *The Evolution of Sikh Community*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996; Ravinder Kaur, 'Jat Sikhs: A Question of Identity', *Contributions to Indian Sociology (n.s.)*, 1986, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 221–239; Kanchan Chandra, 'The Transformation of Ethnic Politics in India: The Decline of the Congress and the Rise of the Bahujan samaj Party in Hoshiarpur', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2000, Vol. 59, No. 1, p. 49; Ronki Ram, 'Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2007, Vol. XLII, No. 40, October 6, pp. 4066–4074; Ronki Ram, 'The Dalit Sikhs', *Dalit International Newsletter* (Waterford, CT.), 2004, Vol. 9. No. 3, October, pp. 5–7.

[40] For a detailed account of Dalit conversion to Christianity see: John C. B. Webster, *A Social History of Christianity: North-west India Since 1800*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007; Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818–1940*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002; John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000; John C. B. Webster, 'Christian Conversion in the Punjab: What has Changed?', in Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke (eds), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 351–380; John C. B. Webster, 'The Christian Movement in Punjab', in Harish K. Puri and Paramjit S. Judge (eds), *Social and Political Movements*, Jaipur: Rawat, 2000, pp. 111–134; Christopher Harding, *Religious Transformation in South Asia: The Meanings of Conversion in Colonial Punjab*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Ganda Singh, *Christianity in the Punjab: A Bibliographical Survey*, Patiala: Punjabi University Press, 1966.

[41] Ram, 'Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras', pp. 4066–4074.

members of the Chuhra caste, the conversion to Christianity remained confined to a few districts of Gujranwala, Sailkot, and Gurdaspur in pre-partition Punjab. After the partition in 1947, it has been confined largely to the Gurdaspur district of the East Punjab.[42] The Chuhras of Punjab 'were rural menials whose traditional occupation was listed as sweeper although most actually worked as agricultural labourers' on the lands of dominant castes in a patron-client relationship. Usually referred to in English as 'sweepers' and mostly landless, they were historically relegated to the very bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy.[43] Their conversion to Christianity did not make much difference as far as their status in the 'hierarchical social relationships within the villages' of Punjab is concerned. As argued by Webster, '[t]his was a gospel of social mobility through inner transformation rather than of structural change through united political action'.[44] What Christian evangelists were aiming at, in fact, was to raise the lowly converts socially, intellectually, morally and spiritually, and to bring them at par with 'the best Christians from the upper classes',[45] rather than to change the graded social system of caste hierarchy.

The story of conversion to Sikhism is not different either. Dalits embraced Sikhism in the hope of attaining social equality, but the curse of untouchability continued to afflict them even in their new avatar.[46] Conversion made no difference whatsoever to the geographies of the marginalized location of Dalit Sikhs. Among the Dalit Sikhs, Mazhabis and Ramdasias have been the most deprived[47]. They continued to struggle within their segregated Dalit

[42] For details see, Webster, *A Social History of* Christianity, pp. 61–182; Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines*, p.116–117, 131; Emmanual Nahar, *Minority Politics in India: Role and Impact of Christians in Punjab Politics*, Chandigarh: Arun Publishers, 2007, pp. 73–81.

[43] Cox, Imperial Fault Lines, p. 116.

[44] Webster, *A Social History of Christianity*, p. 179.

[45] *Lodiana Mission Annual Reports* 1893 as quoted in Webster, *A Social History of Christianity*, p. 179.

[46] Evidence of untouchability against them is vividly reflected in the *Khalsa Dharam Sastra* of 1914 and also in a number of resolutions adopted by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee from 1926 to 1933. Although the Sikh reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries preached in favour of removing untouchability, no strenuous efforts were made in that direction. Social opprobrium continues to afflict them and other Dalits. Some of them feel that Jat Sikhs treat them as badly in the gurdwaras as they do in their farmlands. For details see, Avtar Singh Tehna *et al.*, 'Kyon Bandey hann Derae?' [Why Deras Come into Existence?], *Desh Sewak*, [Panjabi Daily Chandigarh], Sunday Magazine, 2007, 3 June; See also Harish K. Puri, 'Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community: A Historical Perspective', *Economic and Political weekly*, 2003, Vol. 38, No. 26, June 28–July 4, p. 2697.

[47] See Ram, 'The Dalit Sikhs', pp. 5–7.

locations, contemptuously called 'Vehras', 'Thhattis' or 'Chamarlees', relegated to the periphery on the western side of the mainstream village settlements.[48] They have not been granted any space in the Panthic (Sikh religious, organizational and political bodies) structures of power. All the Sikh organizations such as the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Shiromani Akali Dal, and managing committees of various local gurdwaras, have remained beyond their reach. In an empirical study of the caste background of the members of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, conducted by Narinderpal Singh in 2007, it is found that 80 per cent of its administrative posts are under the control of the Jat Sikhs, 15 per cent under other castes and only 5 per cent are with the Dalit Sikhs (Mazhabis and Ramdasias).[49] All three current secretaries of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee are Jat Sikhs. Out of its six current additional secretaries, three happen to be Jat Sikhs, one is Lobana Sikh and the remaining two belong to other backward castes. Out of the total of 60 committees of local gurdwaras, heads of 48 are Jat Sikhs.[50] Reflecting on the distinction between the 'caste' and the 'outcaste' members of the Panth, Joyce Pettigrew has observed: '[t]he only custom in which any solidarity was expressed among the Jats on a caste basis was that in the village they did not visit the houses of Mazhabis, take food from them, eat with them or intermarry with them'.[51] People belonging to the dominant castes continued to identify the Ramdasia and Mazhabi Sikhs by their earlier titles—Chamars and

[48] Sewa Singh Kalsi, 'The Sikhs and Caste: The Development of Ramgarhia Identity in Britain', in Pashaura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier (eds), *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1999, p. 256.

[49] The Jats of Punjab are primarily an agriculture community who have become the dominant caste in the state. The Sikh Empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and subsequent British rule over Punjab helped them considerably in that regard by establishing their hold over the land in the state. See, Marenco, *The Transformation of Sikh society*, Chapters, IV–VII; Xinru Liu, 'Small Landholding in the Punjab: The Historical Perspective', *The Panjab Past and Present*, October 1982, Vol. XVI, No. II, pp. 387–395; Hoshiar Singh Dulhe, *Jattan Da Itihas* (a historical study of one hundred and one Jat sub-castes), Chandigarh: Lokgeet Prakashan 2001.

[50] Narinderpal Singh, 'Shiromani Committee and Caste', *Desh Sewak* (Punjabi Daily, Chandigarh), 2007, Sunday Magazine, 1 July.

[51] Joyce Pettigrew, *Robber Noblemen: A study of the Political System of the Jat Sikhs*, New Delhi: Ambika Publication, 1978, p. 44; see also, J. S. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1998, p. 210; Tara Singh Bains and H. Johnston, *The Four Quarters of the Night: The Life Journey of an Emigrant Sikh*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University press, 1995, p. 48; and Rashpal Walia, 'The Problem of Untouchability among Sikhs in Punjab with Special Reference to Mazhabi Sikhs', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Panjab University, Chandigarh, 1993, pp. 203, 233.

Chuhras[52]. The latter still sit separately along with their Hindu Dalit counterparts in a corner at the entrance of the gurdwaras.[53] In an empirical field study entitled, 'Problem of Untouchability among Sikhs in Punjab', Rashpal Walia found that though the Mazhabi Sikhs have abandoned their traditional occupation of removing human excreta, their status in Sikh society still remains the same: the lowest.[54]

The phenomenon of social boycott of Dalits in rural Punjab is another serious aspect of ongoing caste-based discriminations in the state. Rarely a day passes when Dalits are spared of such humiliating boycotts by dominant castes in the villages.[55] After the much-publicized Talhan conflict,[56] Punjab has witnessed a large number of similar cases in its rural settings. Villages such as Pandori Khajoor in the district of Hoshiarpur, Bhattian Bet of Ludhiana, Talhan, Meham and Athaula of Jalandhar, Patteraiwal of Abhor, Jethumajra and Chahal of Nawan Shahr, Aligarh of Ludhiana, Domaeli and Chak Saboo of Kapurthala, Dhamiana of Ropar, Abuul Khurana of Mukitsar, and Dallel Singh wala, Kamalpur and Hasanpur of Sangrur, and Jhabbar of Mansa are among the most prominent cases of social boycotts and atrocities on Dalits in Punjab. Social boycott is often slapped on Dalits by the upper/dominant castes, probably because the former have been demanding a legitimate share in the local structures of power.[57] It seems as if the strategy of social boycott and the Dalit assertion for legitimate rights are organically linked. Consequently, the systematic denial of their fundamental human rights has forced Dalits to establish their own separate religious centres interchangeably known as deras, temples, gurughars, and gurdwaras.[58] They have also formed their separate *janjghars* (marriage

[52] Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, pp. 268–269.

[53] Gurbachan Singh Bhullar, 'Dera Vivad: Sawal hi Sawal Han, Jawab Koi Nahi!' (Dera Controversy: All Questions, No Answers!), *Nawan Zamana* (Punjabi Daily, Jalandhar), 2007, 8 July p. 2.

[54] Walia, 'The Problem of Untouchability', pp. 264, 266–267.

[55] Villages in Punjab are predominantly Sikh and Dalit. For details see, Ram, 'Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras', p. 4068.

[56] See Ronki Ram, 'Untouchability in India with a Difference: Ad Dharm, Dalit Assertion, and Caste Conflicts in Punjab', *Asian Survey*, November–December 2004, Vol. XLIV, No. 6, pp. 895–912.

[57] Such as village common lands, management committees of religious/cultural/social bodies, Panchayati Raj Institutions (Local Self Government) etc.

[58] Dalits have separate Gurdwaras in about 10,000 villages out of a total of 12,780 villages in Punjab. A survey of 116 villages in one Tehsil of Amritsar district showed that Dalits had separate Gurdwaras in 68 villages. Yet another field-study of 51

centres) and cremation grounds[59] in Punjab. The phenomenon of Ravidass deras/temples/gurdwaras is not only confined to the state of Punjab, it has also gained equal importance among the rich Dalit diasporas.[60] The recent attack on the Ravidassia sants (spiritual persons) of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan of Punjab during their visit to Guru Ravidass Temple in Vienna on 24 May 2009[61] has brought the phenomenon of the Ravidass deras[62] to the centre of the world map. The Ravidass Deras in fact have become a critical agency that graphically manifest and articulate the otherwise dormant dimensions of alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab and overseas. The dimensions

villages selected from the three sub-regions of Punjab found that dalits had separate Gurdwaras in as many as 41 villages. For details see: *Dalit Voice* (Bangalore), 2003, Vol. 22, No. 17, September 1–15, p. 20; Puri, 'Scheduled Caste in Sikh Community', p. 2700; Surinder S. Jodhka, 'Caste and Untouchability in Rural Punjab', *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 2002, Vol. 37 (19), p. 1818; Gurnam Singh Muktsar, 'Sikhs Divided into 3 Warring Camps: Upper Castes, Jats, and Dalits'. *Dalit Voice*, 1–15 (August) 2003, pp. 21–22. For a detailed account of Ravidass Deras in Punjab see, Som Nath Bharti Qadian, *Jagat Guru Ravidass Sampradaya Sant te Sadhna Sthal* (Sants and Deras of World Guru Ravidass Panth), Jalandhar: Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sach Khand Ballan, 2003; Ronki Ram, 'Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India)', *The Journal of Asian Studies* (Cambridge), November 2008, Vol. 67, No. 4, pp. 1341–1364.

[59] They are often heard complaining about why the Jat Sikhs, who refused to consider them equal even after death by denying them the burning of their corpses in the main cremation ground of the village, expect them to remain a part of Sikh religion. See, Tehna *et al.*, 'Kyon Bandey hann'; Vijaya Pushkarna, 'Matter of Faith', viewed online at http://week.manoramaonline.com/cgi-bin/MMOnline.dll/portal/ep/theWeekContent.do?see...5/31/2009 (link no longer available).

[60] See, Ram, 'Ravidass Deras and Social Protest', pp. 1343, 1347; Rajesh Deol, 'Dalits & 'emancipatory' Sikhism', *Deccan Herald*, Sunday, 31 May 2009, http://www.deccanherald.com/content/5454/dalits-amp-emancipatory-sikhism.html (accessed 23 March 2011); K. P. Singh, 'Global Movement of Dalits: Dalits in North America', *The Vancouver Vision on Diversity*, Canada: The Association For International Dalit Conference Inc, 2003, pp. 35–40.

[61] For details see, Kathryn Lum, 'A Minority within a Minority: The Ravidassia Sikhs', *Sikhs in Europe* www.sikhs-in-europe.org, June 2009; http://www.sikhs-in-europe.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=38&Itemid=60 (Accessed 18 March 2011).

[62] Ravidass deras are Dalit religious domains distinguishable from Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples. Dera, literally meaning a holy abode free from the structural bindings of institutionalized religious orders, is the headquarters of a group of devotees owing allegiance to a particular spiritual person, who is reverently addressed as Baba, Sant or Maharaj. A Dera thrives on a distinct philosophy, rituals and symbol, which are inspired by the teachings and philosophy of a particular holy person after whom it has been established. For a detailed account of Deras see, Madan Lal, Gurudom: 'The Political Dimension of Religious Sects in the Punjab', *South Asia Research* (Sage), Vol. 29, No. 3, 2009, pp. 223–234.

and dynamics of the agency of the Ravidass Deras are discussed in detail in the last section of this paper.

Buddhist conversion

Conversion to Buddhism in Punjab, like many other parts of the country, has also failed to enlist good response. Although conversion to Buddhism began with much fanfare in the Doaba region of Punjab on 17 June 1958 under the leadership of Dada Sahib Gaikward of the Republican Party of India, it soon ran out of steam.[63] Since then, over the last four decades, a number of mass conversion ceremonies were organized at different places in the Doaba region of Punjab.[64] Invariably, all these so-called mass conversion ceremonies ended up in attracting only a small fraction of Dalits into the fold of neo-Buddhism. As of 1981, only 1,253 persons were able to embrace Buddhism in Punjab including the Union Territory of Chandigarh—the capital of two states of the Indian Union, Punjab and Haryana.[65] The picture

[63] The first public ceremony for collective conversion to Buddhism was held at 'Chak Hakim' a village in the vicinity of Phagwara town in the district of Kapurthala in Doaba Punjab on 17 June 1958. On this day it is alleged that about 5,000 Dalits of Punjab embraced Buddhism under the guidance of Ven. G. Prajnananda of Buddha Vihara of Lucknow. The conversion ceremony took place amidst a well organized protest drama orchestrated by the Congress party of Punjab under the leadership of Babu Jagjivan Ram, a veteran national Dalit congress leader, Pratap Singh Kairon, the then Chief Minister of Punjab, Master Gurvanta Singh, and Master Sadhu Ram (top Dalit congress leaders of the Punjab congress party) were spearheading the protest against Dalit conversion to Buddhism in the state. The opposing congress leadership was instigating Dalits in Punjab against the conversion ceremony by raising the fear of the demise of Ravidass faith (an alternative religion with a strong following amongst Dalits, particularly of the Chamar caste in the state). For details see, B. R. Sampla, *Vidroh da Chinh: Dr. Ambedkar* [Symbol of Revolt: Dr. Ambedkar], Jalandhar: Pritam Prakashan, n.d., pp. VII–VIII. However, Diwan Chand Ahir, a reputed Buddhist scholar, contested this figure of 5,000 Dalit converts. He was of the opinion that many people who had gathered at the conversion ceremony were the followers of Ambedkar who 'did not show the same zeal and enthusiasm to come over to Buddhism'. See, D. C. Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar and Punjab*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1992, p. 105; Conversation with D. C. Ahir, # 503/15 A, Chandigarh, 9 September 2006.

[64] Some of the most prominent among them were organized by the Buddhist Society of India (Punjab) at the Buddha Vihara at Siddhartha Nagar on 14 October 1981; the Punjab Buddha Mahasabha at Roshan Ground Hoshiarpur on 10 March 1991. For details see, Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar*, pp. 104–116; S. L. Virdi, *Punjab da Dalit Itihas [1901–2000]* (Dalit History of Punjab [1901–2000]), Phagwara: Dalit Sahit Academy Punjab, n.d., pp. 219–228.

[65] Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 105.

remained more or less the same over the next two decades to follow. At present, Buddhists (mostly Dalits) constitute only 0.2 per cent (41,487) of the total population of the state of Punjab.[66] It would not be an exaggeration to say that Neo-Buddhism has failed to strike roots in Punjab. One hardly finds any evidence of its presence around.[67] Even though some Buddha Viharas (Buddhist shrines) have come up in Punjab over the last few years, they have failed to attract the Dalits of the state. Most of them have been functioning without the provision of permanent Bhikkhus (Buddhist priests) and are opened only on the occasion of certain holy events, such as Buddha Jayantis (birth and death anniversaries of Lord Buddha).[68] Moreover, all the Buddha Viharas have been established by, or with the financial support of, the Punjabi Dalit Buddhist diaspora.[69] In other words, there is not much zeal about neo-Buddhism among the Dalits of Punjab.

Diwan Chand Ahir, a reputed Buddhist scholar of the region, attributes the 'slow and tardy' growth of neo-Buddhism in Punjab to the 'over-zealous attachment' of the Dalits to Guru Ravidass, the most famous Dalit sant of the medieval north Indian Bhakti movement.[70] The roots of the faith of Guru Ravidass in Punjab seem to have gone so deep, argues Ahir that '(s)ome people say that Ravidas was our father, how can we disown our father?'[71] The fact that the maiden Buddhist

[66] Census of India, 2001.

[67] Conversation with D. C. Ahir, # 503, 15 A, Chandigarh, 9 September 2006.

[68] Based on a conversation with L. R. Balley, Editor *Bheem Patrika* and the most reputed Ambedkarite Buddhist of Punjab, Chandigarh, 14 March 2009. Also based on a personal communication with D. C. Ahir, A-2/30, Janak Puri, New Delhi–58, dated 13 April 2009.

[69] The following is a complete list of all the existing Buddha Viharas in Punjab: 'Siddharth Nagar Buddha Vihara', Bootan Mandi (Jalandhar), 'Dr. Ambedkar Budhha Vihara', Maksoodan village, (Jalandhar), 'Buddha Vihara', Sofi Pind, 'Saddhatissa Buddha Vihara', Chanan Nagar, Sofi Pind, 'Ananda Buddha Vihara', Siddharth Nagar, Nurmahal Road (Phillaur), 'Anand Buddha Vihara', Anandgarh (Mehllanwali village), Hoshiarpur, 'Buddha Vihara', Bath Kalan, Tehsil Nakodar, 'Ashoka Buddha Vihara', Ravidaspur colony, Mahatpur (Nakodar), 'Sanghamitta Buddha Vihara', Satnampura Colony (Phagwara), 'Mahamaya Buddha Vihara', Balachaur (Nawanshehar), 'Mahashambhoon Buddha Vihara', as part of 'Dr. Ambedkar Buddhist Research Centre', Blaukipur (Phillaur), and 'Takshila Maha Buddha Vihara', Kandan, near Ludhiana. Mr Ram Vilas Paswan, former Union Minister of Steel, Chemicals and Fertilizers, inaugurated the 'Takshila Maha Buddha Vihara' on 8 October 2008. Based on field notes and a personal communication with D. C. Ahir, A-2/30, Janak Puri, New Delhi–58, 13 dated April 2009; see also, http://cities.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=204441 (accessed 23 March 2011).

[70] Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 105.

[71] Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 107.

conversion ceremony (1958) in Punjab was organized at a place called Dehra Guru Ravidass Mandir, situated on Phagwara-Jalandhar main road (believed to be visited by Guru Ravidass during one of his sojourns to the state) illustrates the stronghold of the Ravidass faith in the region.[72] The snail-pace growth of neo-Buddhism in Punjab could also be due to the mushroom growth of Deras of various nomenclatures, such as Radha Soamis, Sacha Sauda, Nirankaris, Namdharis, Divya Jyoti Sansthan, and Bhaniarawala, having a deep following among the Dalit population of the state.[73] The failure to overcome the sense of alienation among the Dalits, caused by deeply entrenched graded caste hierarchy, could be yet another reason behind the poor response neo-Buddhism has received in the state. As C. L. Chumber, Editor-in-Chief of the vernacular monthly *Kaumi Udarian*, puts it so graphically: 'I could not find even a single example showing inter-caste marriages among the various converted Dalit Buddhist castes in Punjab'.[74]

The story related to the fate of the agenda of sanskritisation in Punjab is even worse. The standard markers of the mainstream model of sanskritisation, as identified by its major proponent M. N. Srinivas, have failed to find any resonance in the case of Punjab. Sanskritisation in Punjab is more material than cultural both in content and form. Punjab is primarily an agrarian state. In an agrarian economy, possession of land, as compared with Brahminical rituals and ceremonies, is generally perceived as a key to higher social status. Moreover, for many centuries Punjab remained under the influence of Islam that loosened the grip of Brahminical forces on social structures. The rise of an egalitarian Sikh faith in the fifteenth century further weakened the remnant Brahminical forces by negating the role of ritual and ceremonial practices. Eventually, the space

[72] Guru Ravidass commands enormous respect among the Dalits of Punjab, especially those who belonged to the Chamar caste. Chamar is an umbrella caste category that clubs together Chamar, Jatia Chamar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi and Ravidasi castes. According to the 1991 Census, they constitute 25.8 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population in Punjab. They are the most advanced among all the Dalit castes in Punjab. Many of them have settled abroad (Europe, North America and the Middle East) and help their brethren back home through rich remittances. See, Harish K. Puri, 'Introduction', in Harish K Puri (ed.), *Dalits in Regional Context*, New Delhi: Rawat, 2004, p. 4; Dalip Singh Deep, *Sadhan Main Ravidasa Sant: Jiwan Ate Vichar* (Sant Ravidass among the Saints: Life and Thought). Patiala: Punjabi University, 2001, p. 7.

[73] Based on conversation with L. R. Balley, Editor *Bheem Patrika* and the most reputed Ambedkarite Buddhist of Punjab, Chandigarh, 14 March 2009.

[74] C. L. Chumber, 'Dr. Ambedkar da Dharm Parivartan' (Religion conversion of Dr Ambedkar), *Kaumi Udarian*, July 1988, Vol. 6, Nos. 6–8, p. 27.

vacated by the Brahminical ritual and ceremonial practices has been filled up by the dominant regional cultural patterns thriving on social status based on the possession of land. Since the dominant agrarian peasant community in Punjab has replaced what Brahmins are in terms of social hierarchy in other parts of the country, the criterion of measuring social status has also undergone a major change. In such a distinct socio-economic milieu, social status has come to be defined more in terms of possession of land rather than ritual and ceremonial practices. This new system of social mobility makes the possession of land a prerequisite for all those who desire upward mobility on the social ladder in Punjab. The possession of land has come to be identified as a key index of social status in Punjab in the same way as emulation of upper caste cultural symbols and social practices (as mentioned by M. N. Srinivas in his celebrated thesis on sanskritisation) used to be, and still is, in other parts of India. It is in this particular context of Punjab that the phenomenon of sanskritisation has been understood more in terms of material than cultural indicators. I shall return to this point, with a detailed account of the reasons behind the failure of the mainstream sanskritisation agenda in Punjab, shortly in one of the sub-sections below.

So far, I have concentrated mainly on the agendas of conversion and sanskritisation in general, exploring the key reasons behind their dismal performance in Punjab. I have argued that both these agendas have failed to carve a niche among the Dalits of Punjab. But that does not imply that the Dalits of Punjab have remained entirely bereft of social mobility. On the contrary, they have been able to acquire an enormous amount of social mobility independently of the conversion and sanskritisation agendas.[75] What has prompted

[75] Dalits in Punjab have dissociated from manual labour (the traditional mainstay of their livelihood) and diversified into varied specialized non-caste professions. Their entry into state and national legislature as well as local bodies (village panchayat and municipalities) under state affirmative action has further contributed towards their upward mobility. In addition, they have formed various political organizations, committees, parties, community halls, marriage palaces, and separate shrines (gurdwaras, temples, deras etc.) that helped them in concretizing their separate social identity. Many of them have settled abroad, another significant indicator of their upward social mobility. It is common among the Dalit diasporas to say that: 'I am proud to be a Chamar [historical, derogatory term for the leather-working caste]. I tell everyone, I don't feel any shame. This is who I am and I want others to know', quoted in Kathryn Lum, 'Face to Faith: The Ravidassia movement could help to bring about the end of the caste system in India'. http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/may/08/kathryn-lum-face-to-faith [accessed 28 March

the Dalits of Punjab to strive for social mobility, despite the failure of conversion and sanskritisation agendas, and how the same could possibly be articulated in pursuit of an alternative Dalit agenda of equity and social justice, constitutes the central and critical concern of the remaining sections of this paper.

Contours of Alternative Dalit Agenda

Before I take on the task of articulating an alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab, the central concern of this paper, let me quickly paraphrase the rationale behind choosing Punjab as a critical case study. Moreover, such an exercise may also throw some light on the *raison d'être* for the need of such an agenda in Punjab.

Caste in Punjab

Punjab has a unique pattern of caste hierarchy[76] and social exclusion that distinguishes it from the mainstream Hindu social order, which prevails in the rest of the country.[77] In the predominant Hindu social order, Brahmins are placed at the top of the caste hierarchy. However,

2011]. For a field-based study of the different patterns of upward Dalit social mobility in Punjab see, Paramjit S. Judge and Gurpreet Bal, *Mapping Dalits: Contemporary Reality and Future Prospects in Punjab*, Jaipur: Rawat, 2009.

[76] See, Ronki Ram, 'Regional Specificities and Caste Hierarchies in Punjab', *Indian Journal of Politics*, Vol. 43 (2), June 2009, pp. 15–29.

[77] Ibbotson argued that '[t]he Brahminic influence was probably never so strong in the Panjab as in many other parts of India. . .' Buddha Prakash, another authority on the history of the province, was of the opinion that Brahminic orthodoxy had 'practically abandoned' the province of Punjab quite early in history. The impact of Islam, Sikhism and Christianity had further weakened the grip of the 'Brahminical teachings' in the province. The largescale Dalit conversion to these egalitarian religions was premised on the hope that it would liberate them from the bounds of social exclusion. Though the texture of Brahminical Hinduism was deeply influenced by the arrival of Islam and Christianity from abroad, and the emergence of Sikhism from within, the pristine and tribal system of caste hierarchy refused to cave-in in Punjab. In other words, the institution of caste continued to afflict the Dalits of the province despite the presence of monotheistic and egalitarian traditions of foreign and indigenous religions alike. That is what turned Punjab into a distinct region of weak Brahminical influence with strong indigenous caste hierarchies. For details see: Ibbetson, *Punjab* Castes, p. 15; Buddha Prakash, 'Ancient Punjab: A Panoramic View', in Harbans Singh and N. G. Barrier (eds), *Punjab: Past and Present: Essay in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1976, p. 8.

that order does not prevail in Punjab. Brahmins in Punjab are not venerated. Instead, they are treated rather derogatorily[78] and are condemned as a *mang khani jaat* (a community/caste simply living on alms). Thus against the established practice of Hindu varnashrama dharma (a four-fold division of Hindu society based on a graded rank system of caste hierarchy),[79] Brahmins in Punjab are denied the status of sacred/holy persons or demi-gods. They have been, curiously enough, replaced by Jat Sikhs,[80] who considered themselves superior to all other castes in the state.[81] The replacement of Brahmins by the Jat Sikhs, however, has nothing to do with the complex patterns of Brahminical ritual and ceremonial practices. To be precise, it is due more to material and political considerations.

In fact, what matters the most in the predominantly agrarian political economy of Punjab is the ownership of land rather than the consideration of the Brahminical social order characterized by purity-pollution dichotomy. The mechanism of social exclusion in Punjab is historically tied with the asymmetrical structures of its rural economy that privileged the hegemonic interests of the land-owning 'agricultural caste' over the landless Dalit labourers. Social status in Punjab is closely associated with the ownership of agricultural land. Much of the available agricultural land (more than 80 per cent) is owned by Jat Sikhs who constitute roughly one-third (30–33 per cent) of the total population of the state.[82] Dalits of Punjab, the second

[78] There is a common saying in Punjab that if the first person you meet in the early morning per chance happened to be a Brahmin then your whole day gets spoiled.

[79] It divided Hindu society into four varnas: Brahmina (priest), Kshatriya (soldier), Vaishya (trader), and Shudra (sevants). Below these four varnas are Panchamas, the fifth category, the so-called Untouchables. They are also considered as avarnas (beyond varna or lacking a varna). Broadly speaking, the varna system constituted the very basis of the hierarchically graded caste system in India.

[80] A local peasant caste which was otherwise assigned the lower status in the predominant Hindu social order. The Jat Sikhs claim to occupy the top position in the distinct caste hierarchy in Punjab. See, Indera Pal Singh, 'Caste in a Sikh Village', in Harjinder Singh, (ed.), *Caste among Non-Hindus in India*, New Delhi, National Publishing House, 1977, p. 70; see also P. S. Judge, 'Religion, Caste, and Communalism in Punjab', *Sociological Bulletin*, September 2002, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 178–185.

[81] Singh, 'Caste in a Sikh Village', p. 70; Kaur, 'Jat Sikhs', pp. 221–239.

[82] Punjab is a Sikh (59.9 per cent) majority state. However around 60 per cent of the Sikh population consists of Jat Sikhs who comprise between 30 to 33 per cent of the total population of the state. Another community that comes closer to the Jat Sikhs in Punjab in terms of numbers is the Dalit community. Dalits constitute as much as 29 per cent of the total population of the state (2001 Census). The Scheduled Castes population is expected to increase significantly, as Mahatam/Rai Sikh—another downtrodden community—has recently been included in the list of

largest community in the state, whose numerical strength is almost equal to that of the Jat Sikhs, are mostly landless.[83] They share only 4.82 per cent of the total number of operational holdings in the state and occupy just 2.34 per cent of the total area under cultivation. While many Dalits have abandoned their caste-based occupations and have also distanced themselves from employment in the agricultural fields, their social status in the rural economy remains marginal, precisely because of their acute landlessness. Though cultivation of agricultural land has ceased to exist as a profitable profession for the past few years, the ownership of land continues to be an important factor for the determination of social status in rural Punjab. Irrespective of the fact that many Dalits have benefited from post-independence constitutional affirmative action, proliferation of education, social welfare measures and emigration abroad, a vast majority of them still suffer on account of acute landlessness. This is due partly to historical reasons and partly because of the lingering prejudice amongst dominant upper castes that precludes landowners selling land to the landless Dalits.

Nowhere in India are Dalits so extensively deprived of agricultural land as in Punjab.[84] This severely undermines their social ability to

Scheduled Castes in the Indian constitution (Scheduled Castes Amendment, No. 31, 29 August 2007; Punjab Government Gazette, Regd. No. CHD/0092/2006–2008, No. 45, 9 November 2007.

[83] Dalits were historically deprived of land-ownership rights in the customary scheme of local working relationships in Punjab. They were not even allowed to construct cemented houses on the village common land owned by the village landowning communities. The customary social separatism and deprivation of Dalits was reinforced during the Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and subsequently under colonial rule and the British administration. The Land Alienation Act of 1900 debarred the non-agricultural castes, including Dalits, from buying land. It was only after India's independence that such laws were declared null and void through the concerted efforts of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, chief-architect of the constitution of Independent India and the messiah of the downtrodden. For details see, Webster, A Social History of Christianity, pp. 138–139; Norman G. Barrier, 'The Punjab Goverment and Communal Politics, 1870–1908', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, May 1968, pp. 523–539; Norman G. Barrier, *Punjab Alienation of Land Bill of 1900*, Durham, N. C., 1965; Marenco, *The Transformation*, Chapters IV–VII; Xinru Liu, 'Small Landholding in the Punjab: The Historical Perspective'. *The Punjab Past and Present*, 1982, Vol. XVI (II), October, pp. 387–395; S. L. Virdi, 'Bharat De Dalitan Di Asseem Dastan Da Dastavej' (Document on the endless story of the Dalits in India), Begumpura Shaher, 2003, 11 August, pp. 2, 11.

[84] For details see, Surinder S. Jodhka, 'Caste and Untouchability in Rural Punjab', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 May 2002, p. 1823; Surinder S. Jodhka, 'Sikhism and the caste question: Dalits and their politics in contemporary Punjab', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), Vol. 38, Nos. 1, 2, 2004, p. 183.

participate in the local structures of power in which ownership of land, in other words 'the currency of power in rural society', plays a key role.[85] In the absence of alternative employment opportunities in Punjab, the landlessness of Dalits has reduced them to vulnerable agricultural labourers. Since they do not own land to work on independently, there is no choice for them but to work as landless agricultural labourers on the farms of the landed Jat Sikh aristocracy. Since Jat Sikhs occupy the major chunk of the agricultural land in Punjab and enjoy numerical preponderance, they have been able firmly to establish their hold on the sources and exercise of political power in the state.[86] It is the material and the political predominance of Jat Sikhs, formerly a Shudra (lower/menial) caste that has helped them to acquire the status of a dominant caste in Punjab, which, owing to egalitarian tenets of their faith (Sikhism), earned them sudden legitimacy. The egalitarian tenets of Sikh faith, in fact, has facilitated Jat Sikhs to overcome the ritual barrier of the Varna order, one of '[t]he three main axes of power in the caste system' as described by Srinivas.[87]

The 'caste' domination of Jat Sikhs in Punjab, however, does not compare at all with the Brahminical system of caste hierarchy in general. The defining principles of caste hierarchy are different in Punjab. They are mainly based on factors such as hard manual labour on one's own land, caste homogeneity, martial[88] status, numerical preponderance in the mainstream religion, and hold over the politics in the state. Furthermore, it is a complex combination of all these varied sources of power (social, ethnological, economic, political, religious, and numerical) that determines *the* status in Punjabi society. The only caste in which all the above-mentioned factors coalesce to form a dominant identity is that of Jat Sikhs in Punjab. They qualify as Khalsa or Singh by virtue of religion, Jat Sikhs by virtue of caste, a martial race

[85] The expression in parenthesis is borrowed from *The Hindu* (editorial, 'The caste war in Punjab'), 28 May 2009.

[86] For details see, Ram, 'Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras', pp. 4068–4071.

[87] The other two axes of power are the economic and the political ones. For details see, Srinivas, 'A Note on Sanskritization', p. 483.

[88] The rise of militancy in Sikhism in the sixteenth century was generally attributed to the martial nature of the Jats. For details see: Irfan Habib, 'Jatts of Punjab and Sind', in Singh and Barrier (eds), *Punjab Past and Present*, p. 100; McLeod, *The Evolution of Sikh*, p. 12; Pettigrew, *Robber Noblemen*, p. 26; cf. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations*; Gurdev Singh (ed.), *Perspectives on the Sikh Tradition*, Patiala: Siddharth Publications, 1986; Jagjit Singh, *Perspectives on Sikh Studies*, New Delhi: Guru Nank Foundation, 1985.

by virtue of their being sturdy and having a military background, and landowners by virtue of their strong hold on cultivation. All these different identities reinforce each other and thus help Jat Sikhs, to assert themselves as the dominant caste in Punjab. Such a rare combination of powerful multiple identities and their concentration in a single community of Jat Sikhs is conspicuous by its absence among the Dalits, who, interestingly enough, are almost equal to the former in terms of their numerical proportion in the total population of the state. But unlike Jat Sikhs, Dalits are divided into 39 castes,[89] scattered amongst four religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity and Buddhism), mostly landless, economically marginalized, socially oppressed and politically neglected. It is in such a context, marked by extreme disparity between otherwise almost numerically comparable communities of Jat Sikhs and Dalits, that the distinct pattern of caste hierarchy assumes critical importance in Punjab.

There is a general impression that many Dalits take fancy in borrowing the sub-caste titles of the Jat Sikh and feel proud in emulating the cultural patterns and iconography of this dominant caste. This, however, does not qualify to be a case of sanskritisation in Punjab. As explained above, the Sikh caste hierarchy is completely different from that of the Hindu social order. Unlike the Hindu social order, drinking and eating meat (mutton and chicken) is not a taboo with the Jat Sikhs in Punjab. Nor are the rituals and ceremonies accorded any space at all in the theology of Sikh religion, which has been nurtured by the spiritual and egalitarian social philosophy of Guru Nanak and followed by the nine Gurus of the Panth. As far as particular food habits are concerned, they have been cultivated during the long and tortuous journey of the peasantry (primarily belonging to the Jat Sikh community) in the region popularly known as a 'gateway of invaders'. Relatively, Punjab remained an open society due to the lack of enduring power structures in this borderland state of north India.[90] Though many Dalits in Punjab, being fellow travellers of Jat Sikhs in the region, have similar food habits, this cannot be construed as a case of sanskritisation along the lines suggested by M. N. Srinivas.[91] In fact Dalits in Punjab did not emulate such food habits

[89] Punjab Government Gazette, Regd. No. CHD/0092/2006–2008, No. 45, 9 November 2007.

[90] Based on a conversation with Autar Dhesi, an eminent academic from the region, 25 November 2009.

[91] For a similar argument, though in a different context, please refer to the seminal work of Philip Constable, 'The Marginalization of a Dalit Martial Race in Late

with the intention of getting some space in the eyes of the locally dominant caste, as may be the case in other parts of the country. On the contrary, they adopted such habits in a spirit of competition and to score the point that they too are second to none. In other words, Dalit social mobility in Punjab is more in the mode of assertion, demanding an equal share in the local structures of power, rather than meekly following in the cultural footsteps of the upper/dominant caste.[92] This suggests that the principle of 'a chain reaction' as advocated by M. N. Srinivas in his famous model of sanskritisation[93] cannot be applied to Punjab. Whatever cultural emulation has taken place among the Dalits of Punjab has certainly been not only non-Brahminic but also at the same time does not tally with what Juergensmeyer has described as 'Sikhization'.[94] 'Sikhization' as a concept 'signals a break with the Hindu system'.[95] There is a common impression among the Ambedkarite Dalits in Punjab that Dalit Sikhs have not been able to distance themselves from their erstwhile traditions of Hindu culture.[96] This ambivalence about the changed social status of the Dalits of Punjab is thus inexplicable in terms of the prevalent models of sanskritisation that further singles out Punjab as an apt case for articulation of an alternative Dalit agenda.

The exceptionally large Dalit population in Punjab is another equally important factor that makes it an interesting case for study. Dalits constitute as many as 29 per cent of the total population of Punjab, highest in comparison to all other states in India and much higher than the national average of 16 per cent.[97] Like their counterparts in other parts of the country, Dalits in Punjab do not constitute a homogeneous category. As pointed out earlier, they have been divided into 39 sub-castes scattered within four religious

Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth-Century Western India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2001, 60(2), May, pp. 470–471.

92 For details see Ronki Ram, 'Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness, and the Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), September–December 2004, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 323–349; Ram, 'Ravidass Deras and Social Protest', pp. 1341–1364; Ram, 'Untouchability in India with a Difference', pp. 895–912; Ram, 'Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras', pp. 4066–4074.

93 Srinivas, 'A Note on Sanskritization', p. 483.

94 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables*. Delhi: Ajanta, 1988, p. 272; cf. Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India*, pp. 171–173.

95 Hardtmann, The Dalit Movement in India, p. 171.

96 Ibid.

97 Census of India, 2001.

groups. Though some of them have struggled to overcome their forced social exclusion whilst seeking conversion into Islam, Sikhism and Christianity in the past, the spectre of untouchability continues to haunt them even in their new religious avatars! Their latest attempt, conversion to neo-Buddhism, has also been of little help in liberating them from the shackles of caste-based oppressive structures in the state. Moreover, it has further created another distinctive social category called the neo-Buddhist, which, as perceptively argued by Gokhale, remains different 'both from other Untouchables and from caste-Hindus'.[98]

Alternative Dalit agenda

The alternative Dalit agenda, as the discussion to follow will illustrate, has emerged in Punjab against the backdrop discussed above. Though there are ample signs of such an alternative agenda at the grassroots, one hardly finds any reference to it in the existing scholarly literature. This study aims at fulfilling this gap by critically analysing various facets of the emerging alternative Dalit agenda. This agenda may interchangeably be called Ad/Adi Dharm (original/primal religion), Sant Dharm (religion of the holy persons), Ravidass Dharm, Ravidassism, Ravidass cult, Guru Ravidass movement or Ravidass Deras movement. It is rooted in the native but hitherto scattered worldview of the Dalits of Punjab, who claim to be the indigenous people or the sons of the soil, and would want to be recognized as such. Contrary to the existing models of Dalit social mobility (conversion and sanskritisation) in the rest of India, the alternative agenda urges Dalits to come forward to contest the oppressive and hegemonic social order based on regional cultural patterns of the dominant caste of landed peasantry by giving a concrete shape (discussed below) to their separate social identity in the form of an indigenous religion. Punjab is not an exception. Similar attempts were also made in other parts of the country. Jotirao Phule (1826–1890), the precursor of the discourse of 'the non-Aryan racial theories', established 'Sarvajanic Satya Dharma' (1889) in Maharashtra as the original religion of the Dalits. Swami Achhutanand, a noted former Arya samaji turned Dalit social activist, founded 'Adi-Hindu Dharma' (1922) in Uttar Pradesh in north India.

[98] Gokhale, 'The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change', pp. 272, 278.

Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra and Adi-Karnataka are the south Indian counterparts of the Ad Dharm in Punjab[99].

The central argument of the alternative Dalit agenda revolves around the proposition that Dalits were native to Punjab. That they had their indigenous society (popularly known as Adi/Ravidassi samaj)[100] administered by its own rules. They had their own rich cultural heritage: rulers, gurus, heroes, traditions, culture, symbols, folklores and religion. The marauding Aryans, however, enslaved the natives and established their dominance over them. The Aryans deprived the natives of their history, erased their geographies, and consequently pushed into oblivion their religion, culture, heroes and gurus. The Aryans, it is alleged, ultimately reduced the original inhabitants to what came to be contemptuously called the social category of 'Untouchables'. The narrative unfolds further to emphasize that if the subjugated Dalits want to shed their subordination and retrieve their lost religion, heritage and identity, they need to establish a separate Dalit identity independent of the prominent communities of the region: Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. It is further argued that in order to shed subordination, Dalits need not take refuge in conversion or sanskritisation, as has generally been the case in other parts of the country. Instead, what needs to be articulated is an alternative and innovative religious philosophy that will eventually help them to build a new society free from the oppressive binaries of high/low and pure/polluted.[101] It further reiterates that Dalits should not be shy of their forced low social status; rather they should deploy their so-called low caste identity as an instrument to contest the dominant, hierarchical social order. The emerging alternative Dalit agenda has thus sought Dalit social mobility in Punjab through the unique process of relocation of Ad Dharm—the original but lost Dalit religion—by building on the indigenous and pre-Aryan cultural heritage of the natives. In fact, this argument resembles that of Dr Ambedkar wherein he articulated his choice for conversion to Buddhism on account of its being an ancient

[99] Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, pp. 24–25.

[100] Ravidassi samaj is another nomenclature of the Adivasi/Adi Dharmi (original inhabitants) of the country. It also includes those ex-untouchable people who have been initiated into the Nirankari, Radha Soami, Sarsa Vale, Ak Jot, and other orders of sant mat (sant tradition). In fact, all the ex-untouchable followers of different orders of sant tradition also consider Ravidass to be their Guru.

[101] See, Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, pp. 276, 279, 281; Mendelsohn and Vicziany, *The Untouchables*, p. 102.

religion of the Mahars of Maharashtra[102]. In a similar vein, Ad Dharm can be considered as an ancient religion of the Dalits of Punjab.

The proposed alternative Dalit philosophy evolved in Punjab during the 1920s.[103] It was precisely during this period that a famous Dalit movement called 'Ad Dharm' was born in Punjab. During the same period, as mentioned above, similar Dalit movements based on the idea of native religion came into existence in several other states of the country. However, what made the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab so popular was that it remained at its core a struggle against the local structures of social domination rooted in the exclusive ownership of land and related resources, as well as its emphasis on a separate Dalit identity based on the teachings of the radical sants of the medieval north-Indian Bhakti movement.[104] It was also during this very movement, that the radical image of Guru Ravidass,[105] one of several Dalit *nirguni* Sants (a devotee of God without attributes)[106] of the medieval north-Indian Bhakti movement, was projected meticulously

[102] B. R. Ambedkar, *Conversion as Emancipation*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2004, pp. 7–8.

[103] For a detailed account of the various political developments in the 1920s see: Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, pp. 20–32; Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, pp. 105–107; Mendelsohn and Vicziany, *The Untouchables*, p. 99; Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar*, pp. 9–11; Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India*, pp. 54–56; Cox, Imperial Fault Lines, pp.135, 266–269.

[104] For details see: Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*; Mark Juergensmeyer 'Ad Dharm Movement', In Harish K. Puri and Paramjit S. Judge (eds), *Social and Political Movements: Readings on Punjab*, New Delhi: Rawat, 2000; Ram, 'Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness', pp. 323–349. cf. p. 87.

[105] Ravidass belonged to Uttar Pradesh. He was born at Seer Goverdhanpur, a suburb in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. His followers from Punjab have raised a huge temple [Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple] at the place of his birth. However some scholars traced his birthplace to Mandoorgarh village—situated on the main road about two kilometres from Mughal Sarai Railway station, also near Varanasi. For details see: Misardeep Bhatia, 'Shri Guru Ravidass Ji Nu Minnan Wallian Nu Jooruri Succhna' (Important Information for the Followers of Shri Guru Ravidass), *Adi Gurparkash Patrika* (Jalandhar), 1993, Special Volume, pp. 1–3; Deep, *Sadhan Main Ravidasa*, p. 2; Joseph Schaller, 'Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence in the Sant Ravidass Panth', in David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1996, p. 114; Bhai Jodh Singh, *Bhagat Ravidas: Jiwan Te Rachna* (Bhagat Ravidass: Life and Works). Patiala: Punjabi University, 2000, pp. 1–2.

[106] For a detailed account of nirguni tradition see, John Stratton Hawley, 'The Nirgun/Sagun Distinction in Early Manuscript Anthologies of Hindu Devotion', in David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India*, pp. 160–180; David N. Lorenzen, 'The Lives of Nirguni Saints', in Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India*, pp. 181–211; Frits Staal, 'The Ineffable Nirguna Brahman', in Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (eds), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, Delhi: Motilal

to concretize the newly conceived Dalit cultural space in the state. The fact that the Dalits of Punjab, especially those who belonged to the Chamar caste, consider Ravidass their Guru made the movement instantly popular among them.[107] Guru Ravidass was already well known among the lower castes of Punjab. The fact that 40 hymns and one couplet of the sacred bani (poetry) of Guru Ravidass are included in the Adi Granth (holy scriptures of the Sikh faith, popularly known as Guru Granth Sahib) speaks volumes to his immense popularity in the region. His struggle against the system of untouchability, anchored in an enlightened vision of an egalitarian social order (Begumpura), at a time when no one was ready to lend a supporting hand to the oppressed untouchables, won him a special place in the minds of Dalit masses. The Ad Dharm movement strategically cashed in on the mass popularity of Guru Ravidass by displaying his pictures as its emblem, reading his poetry as a revolutionary text and deploying legends about him as illustrations of lower caste pride and power.[108] In a nutshell, Guru Ravidass, who had already set the ball of alternative Dalit agenda rolling, 'was brought to the centre-stage in Punjab by the Ad Dharm movement'.[109] Consequently, the Ravidass phenomenon, in the form of the Ravidass cult or Ravidass Deras movement, became

Banarsidass, 1987, pp. 41–46; Wendy O'Flaherty, 'The Interaction of *Saguna* and *Nirguna* Images of Diety', in Schomer and McLeod (eds), *The Sants*, pp. 47–52.

[107] Ravidass himself belonged to *Kutbandhla* (Chamar) caste, one of the Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh. Chamars are known by their profession of leather and tanning. They were oppressed and their touch and sight were considered polluting by the upper castes. However, there is an alternate version about the etymological origin of the term 'Chamar'. This version believes that the Chamar community is Buddhist in origin, and that 'Chamar' is derived from the Pali word 'Cigar' [bhikku's robes] and not from *Charm* [leather] Chamars comprise about 26 per cent (1991 census) of the total Scheduled Caste population of the state. If clubbed with Ad Dharmis, another Dalit caste, together they comprised 42 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population in Punjab. Since the majority of Ad Dharmis are Chamars, they are popularly known as 'Ad Dharmi Chamars'. Chamars and Ad Dharmi Chamars are mostly concentrated in the Doaba sub-region of the state. For details see: R. P. S. Gosal, 'Distribution and Relative Concentration of Scheduled Caste Population in Punjab', in Harish K. Puri (ed.), *Dalits in Regional Context*, Jaipur: Rawat, 2004, p. 23; James G. Lochtefeld, 'The Saintly Chamar: Perspectives on the Life of Ravidas', in Eleanor Zelliot and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (eds), *Untouchable Saints*: *An Indian Phenomenon,* New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, pp. 208–212; Chandrabhan Prasad and Mahesh Dahiwale, 'Ravidas in the Contemporary World', in Eleanor Zelliot and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (eds). *Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, pp. 254–256.

[108] Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, p. 33.

[109] Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 105. See also Paramjit Singh Judge, 'Bhagwant Rasoolpuri de Kahani 'Jarhan'' (The Story 'Jarhan' by Bhagwant Rasoolpuri), *Parvachan*, No. 36, 2009, July–September, p. 14.

the epicentre of the emerging Dalit agenda. In fact, it was in this unique way that the Ad Dharm movement has sown the seeds of an alternative Dalit philosophy in the state of East Punjab.[110]

Ad Dharm versus conversion and sanskritisation

Adherence to the phenomenon of Ad Dharm or the Ravidass cult is different from both conversion and sanskritisation. Conversion implies denouncing one's own religion in which one is born, in order to embrace some other religion. Many Dalits are of the opinion that they are not originally Hindus, Sikhs, Christians or Buddhists and have acquired such religious identities by way of conversion at some point of time during their long history of social exclusion. They also emphasize that they were the natives of this country over whom the alien Aryan had not only established their rule by force, but also systematically destroyed their religion and cultural heritage. It is further alleged that the natives who are now called Dalits were forced to adopt the religion (Hinduism) of their alien masters.[111] With the passage of time, many Hindu Dalits embraced Islam, Sikhism and Christianity in the hope of shedding the shackles of the Hindu system of 'untouchability': a hereditary system of social exclusion. Ironically, the spectre of untouchability continues to haunt them even in their new religious avatars, which has forced them to retrieve their lost native religion and cultural heritage. It is against this background that the adherence of Dalits to the Ravidass cult could be considered as their 'homecoming' or a case of retrieving their lost native religion. However, if some non-Dalits come to join the Ravidass cult then in that case such adherence may be termed 'conversion'. But as far as Dalits are concerned, their adherence to the Ravidass cult cannot be considered a case of conversion for the following reasons. First of all

[110] The Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), the Republican Party of India (RPI), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have subsequently emerged as the political parties of the Dalits. For details See, Ram, 'Untouchability in India with a Difference', pp. 895–912.

[111] Based on conversations with K. C. Sulekh, an Ambedkarite and prolific writer, Chandigarh, 2 December 2004; K. C. Shenmar, an Ambedkarite and retired Punjab Police officer, Chandigarh, 14 July 2001; Chanan Lal Manak, an active member of the Ad Dharm Mandal, Jalandhar, 1 May 2001; see also, Babu Hazara Ram Piplanwala, 'Lothian Committee and Ad Dharm Mandal', *Kaumi Udarian*, 1986, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 10–15; Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, pp. 295–298.

this cult was established by the Dalits themselves. Secondly, its roots can be traced to the teachings of Guru Ravidass who himself was also a Dalit. In addition, this cult is still in the process of developing into a full-fledged religion towards which Dalits themselves have been working meticulously.

As for sanskritisation, the emulation of cultural symbols of the Ravidass cult cannot be considered a case of this phenomenon either. For a Dalit to adopt the cultural symbols of this cult is in no way equivalent to cultural emulation, as is generally the case with mainstream sanskritisation. On the contrary, emulation of the symbols of the Ravidass cult by Dalits is a case of radical manifestation of their dormant and suppressed culture, and their resistance to dominant social practices that have relegated them to the periphery for centuries. It is radical also in the sense that it emancipates them from the sense of indignity being attached to their 'lowly' occupation. The adoption of high-caste iconography and practices among Ravidassias is more symbolic of a social protest than of cultural emulation. Guru Ravidass adopted cultural and ritual symbols of upper castes precisely to cross the prohibited boundaries of the restricted social domains separating the polluting ex-untouchables from the so-called holy Brahmins. He did not wear the sacred thread and other cultural symbols of the upper castes in order to rise on the scale of the graded caste hierarchy. On the contrary, what he was trying to demonstrate perhaps was that Brahmins were no longer a class apart in terms of 'purity'. Nor could the Brahmins force the Dalits to abstain from emulating the iconography of the former on the grounds that the latter are impure. The pure, according to Guru Ravidass, is the one who works with his/her own hands rather than lives on the earnings of others and distinguishes himself/herself by hiding under bloated appearances. It is in this unique way that Guru Ravidass, the chief patron of the Ravidass cult, demonstrated successfully that it is the manual labour which is supreme rather than the hollow prestige based on false Brahminical ritual and ceremonial practices. In short, the adoption of cultural symbols of the Ravidass cult is more a case of radical manifestation of Dalit dignity and identity rather than a form of sanskritisation.

Before discussing the significant role played by the Ad Dharm movement in concretising the alternative Dalit agenda, let me explain at some length how the poetry and legends about the life of Guru Ravidass inspired the Dalits of this region to think about the possible articulation of an alternative Dalit agenda, and how emulation of

the upper castes cultural symbols by the lower castes could not be described as a case of sanskritisation but instead as a unique way of radical manifestation of social protest.

The Ravidass phenomenon and an alternative Dalit agenda

One of the most famous untouchable sant-poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and a leading star of the north Indian bhakti movement, especially the nirguna sampradaya or sant mat/parampara,[112] Guru Ravidass is by far the most revered among Dalits, especially the Chamars/Chambhars/Charmakars of northwest and central India. His popularity can be known from a variety of names attributed to him by his followers in different regions and languages.[113] He is known as Raidasa, Rohidasa, Ruidasa, Ramadasa,

[112] The concept of Bhakti in Sant Mat/Parampara is entirely different from that of the Vaishnava (Vishnuite) tradition. In the vaishnava tradition, bhakti is based on idol worshipping of the various avatars of God (Sagun). The sant parampara lays emphasis on loving adoration of and devotion to the non-anthropomorphic God (Nirgun), and continuous recitation of the 'word' (naam) given by the Guru. Though sant parampara and vaishnav traditions are collectively known as the Bhakti movement, the former is radical in content and appeal and is also known as Nirguna Bhakti. The famous Bhaktas (devotees) associated with the sant parampara/nirguna Bhakti were Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Sain, Pipa, Dhanna, Sadna and Ravidass. Many of them belonged to the lower caste. Sant Ravidass '...came from a caste that ranks below that of any of his compeers in the world of medieval North Indian *bhakti*' (John Stratton Hawley, 'Author and Authority in the *Bhakti* Poetry of North India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, May 1988, Vol. 47, No. 2, p, 270). For a detailed account of Sant Mat/Parampara of the North Indian Bhakti movement see: John Stratton Hawley, 'Author and Authority in the *Bhakti* Poetry of North India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, May 1988, Vol. 47, No. 2, p. 270; W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968; Jayant Lele, 'The Bhakti Movement in India: a Critical Introduction', in Jayant Lele (ed.), *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981, pp.1–15; Parshuram Chaturvedi, *Uttari Bharat ki sant-parampara* (Sant Tradition of North India), Prayag: Bharati Bhandhar, 1952; David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India*; Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity' in Schomer and McLeod (eds), *The Sants*, pp. 21–40; Bruce B. Lawrence, 'The Sant Movement and North Indian Sufis', in Schomer and McLeod (eds), *The Sants*, pp, 359–373; Darshan Singh, *The Study of Bhakta Ravidasa*, 2nd edn. Patiala: Punjabi University 1996, pp. 83–86.

[113] Sangam Lal Pandey, *Existence, Devotion and Freedom: The Philosophy of Ravidass*, Allahabad: Darshan Peeth, 1961, pp. 7–8; Eleanor Zelliot, 'Ravidas to Ambedkar', *Voices from Vancouver: The Souvenir of The International Dalit Conference, Vancouver, Canada: May 16–18, 2003*, Canada: The Association For International Dalit Conference Inc., p. 27; Joginder Singh, 'Shri Guru Ravidass Viaktitav da Nirnan' (The Decision of

Raedasa, Rohitasa, Rahdesa, Rav Das and Rab Das.[114] The mere mention of his name evokes a sense of confidence and self-respect among his followers who feel proud of their caste identity. 'Although in the past Ravidas's low status may have presented a problem, his present-day admirers strive to affirm it, not deny it', argues, James G. Lochtefeld.[115] A large number of Guru Ravidass followers prefer to be identified as 'Ravidassias' or 'Ravidassi Adharmis'.[116] They also feel proud of their Chamar (a derogatory term, historically used for the leather-working caste) identity. This newfound pride of both collective and individual self-confidence, particularly among the Dalit diaspora, has led to what Kathryn Lum calls 'the development of a unique symbol for the Ravidassia movement'.[117]

What made Guru Ravidass the most popular Sant in northern India was probably his fight against untouchability and his frequent standoff with the pundits (Brahmin priests) of Varanasi (widely known as the cradle of the varnashram order, headquarters of Hindu religiosity, and the seat of Brahmin learning),[118] who saw his bhakti as a prototype of revolt by the Untouchables against the centuries-old system of Brahminic hegemony. He expressed his bhakti in the form of radical poetry, exposing graphically the atrocious treatment received by Dalits at the hands of upper castes. His was a new way, as he refused to ride the bandwagon of social prestige by adopting the cultural worldview of the Brahmins/upper castes or by embracing any other religion for that matter. Guru Ravidass preferred to contest social exclusion without compromising his distinct Dalit identity. Throughout his poetry, Guru Ravidass seems to be particularly concerned about his low caste status, as many of his poems conclude with a bold reference to his caste.

the Individualism of Shri Guru Ravidass), *Hashia* (Punjabi Quarterly, Ludhiana), January–March 2009, pp. 7–9.

[114] Darshan Singh, *The Study of Bhakta Ravidasa* (2nd edn.), Patiala: Punjabi University, 1996, p. 25; Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G. Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidâs,* New Delhi: Manohar, 1992, pp. 20–21; Sir Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, Punjab: Language Department Punjab, [1883] 1970, p. 300.

[115] James G Lochtefeld, ' The Saintly Chamar: Perspectives on the Life of Ravidas', In Zelliot and Punekar (eds), *Untouchable Saints*, pp. 201–202.

[116] Hawley, 'Author and Authority', p. 272; Kanchan Chandra, 'The Transformation of Ethnic Politics in India: The Decline of Congress and the Rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Hoshiarpur', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, February 2000, Vol. 59. No. 1, p. 49.

[117] Lum, 'Face to Faith'.

[118] Prasad and Dahiwale, 'Ravidas in the Contemporary World', p. 250.

Yet another important aspect of Guru Ravidass' life that made him a role model for the downtrodden is a legend that portrays him as firmly declining to use a *paras* [a mythical stone that turns iron into gold] given to him by a holy man.[119] This legend seems to be symptomatic of his indifference towards unearned wealth—a Brahminical trait—and of his deep resolve for manual labour and earnings by the sweat of brow. In other words, his resolve for the sweat of brow lent purity and respect to *kirat* (manual work)–a shramanic tradition. It vindicates the fact that the alternative Dalit agenda as articulated by Guru Ravidass comes closer to the shramanic tradition in opposition to that of Brahminic.[120] Guru Ravidass wanted to prove that Brahmins were '. . .hollow figures pumped up with false pride and hypocrisy'.[121] That is why he preferred to continue his association with the so-called hereditary low caste occupation of shoemaker. It clearly shows his firm belief that if the socially excluded wanted to improve their lot they need not abdicate their so-called defiled hereditary occupation. In other words, Guru Ravidass attributed dignity to the manual labour, the mainstay of a vast majority of Dalits.

Consequently, this in turn has inspired many Dalits who take pride in flagging their so-called low caste titles publicly. One often finds in the Doaba region of Punjab motorcycles and cars with stickers proudly proclaiming: *'Putt Chamaran de'* (Sons of Chamars) and 'SC boys' (Scheduled Castes boys). I have also met an American Punjabi Dalit girl in California (during my visit to the United States in May 2008) who has obtained a special number plate (*CHAMRI NO. 1*) for her personal car in order to clearly demonstrate her so-called low caste identity. Thus Dalits, as the discussion so far has shown, in following the path shown by Guru Ravidass, have not only refused to conceal their so-called inferior social status, they are in fact vehemently questioning the Hindu as well as the local dominant caste-based social hierarchy that has forced them to live on the social-cultural margins for centuries. The leaders of the famous Ad Dharm movement in Punjab saw in the poetry and teachings of Guru Ravidass the intellectual tools

[119] Deep, *Sadhan Main Ravidasa Sant*, pp. 11, 17; K. P. Singh, 'Global Movement of Dalits: Dalits in North America', *The Vancouver Vision on Diversity*. Canada: The Association For International Dalit Conference Inc., 2003, pp. 35–40.

[120] For a detailed account of shramanic tradition see, Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, Delhi Manohar, 2005, pp. 73–84.

[121] Schaller, 'Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence', p. 107.

for liberation.[122] The preaching of Guru Ravidass, in fact, has taken the shape of a political strategy based on his 'dissident socio-religious philosophy and ideology'.[123] The 'dissident socio-religious philosophy and ideology' of Guru Ravidass has eventually become the most salient feature of the emerging alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab.

Bhakti, social protest and the alternative Dalit agenda

The alternative Dalit agenda, as enshrined in the teachings and writings of Guru Ravidass, can be better understood by exploring the subtle nuances of his unique form of bhakti that set the stage for a radical Dalit movement in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[124] This form of bhakti appears to be free from all kinds of religious rituals and sectarian characteristics of the mainstream Hindu bhakti. Based on moral principles of compassion and dignity of labour, his bhakti reflected the democratic and egalitarian tenets of pre-Aryan cultural heritage. In fact, Guru Ravidass gave a new meaning to bhakti and transformed it into a novel and daring method of social protest against the system of untouchability and 'the inequitable distribution of power and wealth. . .'.[125] It was novel in the sense that it emphasized compassion for all and expressed absolute faith in a formless God. The principle of compassion for all reflected the egalitarian traits of his social philosophy and struggle. His absolute faith in the formless God (nirgun) was aimed at exposing the apathy of the social elite of his times towards the plight of the downtrodden, for the emancipation of whom he had sought refuge in no one else but God. His bhakti-based method of social protest was daring because he chose to imitate Brahmins while symbolizing his protest; a highly objectionable form of social behaviour for an outcaste of his times.[126] Guru Ravidass challenged the tyranny of Brahmins by wearing *Dhoti* (cloth wrapped

[122] *The Hindu* (editorial: 'The caste war in Punjab'), 28 May 2009.

[123] Schaller, 'Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence', p. 94.

[124] Philip Constable, 'Early Dalit Literature and Culture in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1997, 31(2), pp. 317–338.

[125] Schaller, 'Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence', p. 116; Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp, 'From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidass and Ambedkar', *Economic and Political weekly*, 9–15 June 2007, p. 2182.

[126] Shudras were prohibited from hearing and reading the sacred texts of the Hindu religion. Its violation invited the severest punishment, as mentioned in the *Manusmriti*, the law book of Hindu religion.

around the waist), *Janeue* (sacred thread) and *Tilak* (sacred red mark on forehead). The skillful deployment of Brahminical iconography by Guru Ravidass was an anathema for the Untouchables. His was an innovative as well as an alternative way of Dalit assertion. Though he attired himself like an upper caste, he deliberately did not hide his low caste identity. He also continued with his so-called defiled hereditary occupation of making and mending shoes. By imitating the Brahminical iconography, he probably was aiming to show how the lower castes could assert their separate and collective Dalit identity by challenging the social superiority of the upper castes but without compromising their hereditary low caste occupations or converting to any other religion.

Guru Ravidass expressed his bhakti in the form of bani (spiritual philosophy) written in a poetic medium. His bani has universal appeal. It is full of radical fervour and boundless love for a formless God. It created significant space for the articulation of the 'hope for a better world and a fight against exploiters, power-holders and oppression going on under the name of religion'.[127] Some scholars are of the opinion that although the devotional songs and hymns of his poetry reflected the sufferings of the downtrodden, they lacked the reformatory zeal and outright condemnation of Brahminism and the caste system, something that animated the poetry of Kabir and Tukaram.[128] Apparently there is a difference in tone between the poetry of Kabir and Ravidass, but both seem to convey the same message. The poetry of Guru Ravidass is marked by a sense of humility and devotion. At the same time it is full of reformatory zeal and a deep concern for the downtrodden. The bani of Guru Ravidass reflects his concern for the social and spiritual needs of the downtrodden and underlines the urgency of their emancipation.[129]

The above mentioned bhakti-oriented approach of social protest gained further importance due to its non-violent nature, which in turn underscores the peaceful stance of the emerging alternative Dalit agenda. Guru Ravidass, as mentioned earlier, wanted to transform the oppressive Hindu social order through peaceful means. For that he innovatively brought the benevolent but formless figure of God in

[127] Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*, New Delhi: Sage, 2003, p. 33; see also, Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India*, p. 57.

[128] S. N. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976, p. 162; Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, p. 191.

[129] Chaman Lal, *Dalit Sahitya ke Agardoot; Guru Ravidass* (Precursor of Dalit Literature: Guru Ravidas). Panchkula: Aadhar Publication, 1998, p. 7.

to his arsenal of social protest. Guru Ravidass's God was graceful, who elevated and purified the so-called Untouchables relegated to periphery in the Hindu social order. *Aaisee lal tujh binu kaunu karai. Gareeb niwaaju guseea meraa maathai chhatar dharai. . .neecho uooch karai meraa govind kaahoo te na darai* (refrain My Beloved, besides you who acts like this? Protector of the poor, my Master. You hold a royal umbrella over my head).[130] He further said: *Meri jaati kut bandhlaa dhor dhouwanta nithi baanaarasi aas paasaa. Ab bipar pardhan tihi karih danduouti tere naam sarnaaie Ravidass daasaa* (My Caste is Kutabådhalā, I cart carcasses constantly around Benares. Now Brahmans and headmen bow down before me, Ravidās the servant has taken refuge in Your Name).[131] The formless God, reiterated Guru Ravidass, had not only elevated his social status, but also made him the elite of the elite amongst upper castes.

It is in this context that Guru Ravidass not only followed a non-violent form of struggle against social oppression, but also prevailed upon the oppressors to abandon the path of violence.[132] Thus, instead of embracing some other religion or following in the footsteps of the upper castes, Guru Ravidass convinced his followers of the advantage of remaining true to their unique Dalit identity: one of the most potent dimensions of the emerging Dalit agenda in Punjab. Guru Ravidass, therefore, is regarded as a messiah by the downtrodden, who revere him as devoutly as Hindus worship their gods and goddesses, and Sikhs revere their gurus.[133] They regularly worship his image, recite his hymns, and express faith in his spiritual powers.[134]

[130] Adi Granth, p. 1106, as translated in Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 166. Hereafter translations of the quotations from the poetry of Ravidass are taken from Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works*; and the Panjabi couplets (romanized) of Ravidass' poetry where the page numbers of the Adi Granth are taken from Sat Pal Jassi, and Chain Ram Suman, *Holy Hymns and Miracles of Guru Ravi Dass Ji,* Bal, Jalandhar: Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Public Charitable Trust, 2001.

[131] Adi Granth, p. 1293. This hymn seems to testify one of the legends in which the bewildered Brahmins were shown prostrating before him after they found his bodily image appear between each and every one of them during a feast thrown by Queen Jhali at Chittorgarh.

[132] Balraj Puri, 'Samajik Sabhyacharik Krantikari Guru Ravidass' (Socio-cultural Revolutionary Guru Ravidass), *Bheem Patrika* (Jalandhar) [Special Issue on Shri Guru Ravidass Birth Anniversary], (February), 2006, Vol, 2, Nos. 3–4, p. 11.

[133] Conversation with Sant Prem Dass Jassal, President, all India Satguru Ravi Dass Mission, Vancouver, 17 May 2003.

[134] Doniger Wendy, Consulting Editor, *Merriam—Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions*. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam—Webster, Inc. 1999, p. 910.

The agenda and the resistance

The low-caste profile but high spiritual status of Guru Ravidass posed a serious challenge to the Brahmin priests who failed to confront his pragmatic and revolutionary reasoning based on the principles of non-violence, equality, dignity and fraternity. Instead of confronting Guru Ravidass head on, the Brahmin priests attempted to appropriate him within the Hindu fold. They concocted stories to portray him as a Brahmin in his previous life.[135] According to one such story, Guru Ravidass was a Brahmin in his previous birth. But due to his bad habits of meat-eating and the Untouchable status of his wife he had to be born as a Chamar. Another story tells that Ramananda, his so-called Guru, cursed him in his previous life to be born into a family of Untouchables on account of his accepting offerings from a local money lender who had dealings with leather workers. As Gail Omvedt has pointed out, '[t]his itself indicates the degree of purity-pollution behaviours observed even by Brahmin ascetics'.[136] Moreover, this account 'also reinforces conventional opinions of Chamars as being extremely polluting. Ramanand curses his disciple not for taking food directly from chamars, but from a person who merely does business with them. Yet even such indirect contact is enough to render the food impure'.[137] The story does not end there, however. It further informs that baby Ravidass refused to accept the milk of his low caste mother. He accepted it when Ramanand supposedly reminded him of his misbehaviour in the previous life. Another story about his co-option in the Brahminical fold narrates that he had a golden sacred thread under his skin, though it was invisible on his body. When Brahmins declined to eat while sitting in the same row with him during a feast given in his honour by Jhali, the queen of Chittor, he left the room. But as they sat to dine, they found an image of Guru Ravidass appearing at the side of each of them. The story also tells that he cut open his

[135] Ironically, even some Dalits also feel comfortable with such concoctions about his life. Being his caste fellows, the elevated status of Ravidass serves as a facilitator in their attempt to move up the social hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. See, John Stratton Hawley, and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 13.

[136] Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, p. 192.

[137] Lochtefeld, ' The Saintly Chamar', p. 205.

chest and revealed the sacred thread that lay within as a clear proof of his being a Brahmin in his former life.[138]

Thus challenged by the surging popularity of Guru Ravidass, among the lower and upper castes alike, Brahmins knitted layers of mythological narratives about his previous mythical high caste profile. 'This was a final masterstroke, argues Chahal, an NRI [non-resident Indian] Dalit activist, to minimize his influence on the society as a whole'.[139] Probably, this was done to preclude the lower castes from rallying around his charismatic figure.[140] Yet another device adopted by the twice-born to diminish his popularity was to present him as a Guru of Chamars only.[141]

The process of Brahminisation/sanskritisation of Guru Ravidass has come to be condemned by some of the Dalit activists and academics. They ridiculed the Brahminical narratives and interpretations about Guru Ravidass and also refused to accept Ramanand as his Guru.[142] Some have argued that Guru Ravidass had never mentioned the name of Ramanand in his most authentic bani recorded in the Adi Granth (Guru Granth Sahib). Instead, he mentioned names of the following sants: Jaidev, Namdev and Kabir.[143] Some radical Dalit activists claim 'that his Guru was Sardanand, and emphasize his ability to defeat Brahmins time and again in debates'.[144] Thus the discourse of the

[138] For a detailed account of such stories see: Zelliot and Punekar (eds), *Untouchable Saints*, especially the section on Ravidass; Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*; Hawley and Juergensmeyer *Songs of the Saints*, pp. 9–32.

[139] Chanan Chahal, (n.d.) *Satguru Ravidass a Revolutionary*, Unpublished paper, pp. 4–5.

[140] Conversation with Karam Singh Raju, an ex-IAS officer, prolific writer and devotee of Ravidass, Chandigarh, 9 February 2004.

[141] Though Ravidass was himself a chamar, his egalitarian social philosophy won him many disciples among the upper castes too. Jhali, Queen of Chittor; Mirabai, Rajput princess and daughter-in-law of the King of Mewar, Sangram Singh; Prince Veer Singh Dev Vaghela of Rewa of Madhya Pradesh; and the Prince of Kanshi were the most prominent among them. However, as far as Mirabai is concerned, different scholars hold different views regarding the belief of her being a disciple of Ravidass. For details see: G. C. Kaul, 'Guru Ravidass: Ik Mahaan Vyaktitava' (Guru Ravidass: A Great Personality), in Jagjiwan Ambedkari (ed.), *Shri Guru Ravidass Ji Souvenir*, Jalandhar: All India Samata Sainik Dal, 2001, p. 48; Chaturvedi, *Uttari Bharat ki sant-parampara*, pp. 239–240.

[142] Conversation with K. C. Sulekh, an Ambedkarite and prolific writer, Chandigarh, 2 December 2004.

[143] Gurnam Singh Muktsar, *Kahe Ravidas Chumara* (Thus Spake Ravidass Chamar), Jalandhar: *Dera* Sach Khand Ballan, 2002, pp. 70–74; see also his, *Sikh Lehr De Sirjak* (Originators of the Sikh Movement), Jalandhar: Bahujan Samaj Prakashan, 2004.

[144] Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, p. 192; see also Hawley, and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints*, 1988, p. 15.

Brahminisation of Guru Ravidass had not only failed to assimilate him into the fold of the upper castes, it further strengthened the existing cultural-spiritual bond between him and his lower caste followers. The latter took great pride in being known as 'Ravidassias'. And Guru Ravidass became the paragon of their struggle for social equality and dignity as a viable alternative to conversion and sanskritisation agendas.

Begumpura: Utopia of the Dalit Raj

Utopias[145] have played a crucial role in subaltern struggles against social exclusion in India. Emerging at almost the same time as in Europe, utopias in India were mostly envisioned by subaltern artisans of the Dalit and Bahujan[146] samaj (society), the precursor of the radical bhakti movement in the 'early modern period'.[147] Pandharpur (the city of social equality) of Tukaram, Amrapur (the city of immorality) of Kabir, and Begumpura (the city without castes, classes, taxes and free from all sorts of afflictions, sorrows and social barriers) of Ravidass are some of the most popular utopias in India during this period. The Bali Rajya of Phule, the Dravidastan of Periyar, the Buddhist commonwealth of the Sakya Buddhists, Achutistan and Sachkhand of Mangoo Ram, and Prabuddha Bharat of Ambedkar are a few other examples of utopian models of a subaltern state in India envisioned by its dalit-bahujan intellectuals and leaders. The utopias of Premnagar (the city of love) of Bullhe Shah of the Sufi tradition and Halemi Raj (the rule of benevolence) of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru (Master) of the Sikh faith, however, are yet a few but forceful social alternatives envisioned in the non-dalit-bahujan circles that dared to 'move beyond the *dominant Islamic social order*, *and* sanskritized and brahmanic perspectives that militated against visions of equality'.[148] Almost all the above mentioned utopias promised an equitable and

[145] For details see, Thomas More, *The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia*, in Richard S. Sylvester (ed.), *The Complete Works of St Thomas More, Vol. 4*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1965; Mannheim Karl, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Trans. From German by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, New York: Harvest Books, 1936; Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London: Verso, 2007, 2nd edn.

[146] Presently Other Backward Castes (OBCs).

[147] The early modern period as refereed to by Gail Omvedt covers a time span of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. See, Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*, Pondicherry, Navayana, 2008, p. 15.

[148] Ibid.

inclusive social existence based on pious living earned through the sweat of brow. These varied utopian visions of a promised land of social justice and love were not at all motivated by some kind of mythical golden past or age, as happened to be the case with the Brahminical social world. Instead, they were deeply oriented towards a better future 'along the lines envisioned by exploited castes, working classes and feminist visionaries throughout history'.[149]

Among the above-described utopias, 'Begumpura' is the most comprehensive one. It played a critical role in the emergence of an alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab. The utopia of Begumpura or Dalit Raj is an egalitarian blueprint of a subaltern state envisaged by 'the bhakti radical, Sant Ravidas (*circa* 1450–1520), [who] was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia...'.[150] It encompasses civil liberties and human rights for all. Under its jurisdiction, no one would be discriminated against on the basis of caste and religion and everyone would be free from the burden of taxes, restrictions on movements and worries of livelihood. There would be no place for a caste-based system of 'graded inequality' in the city of Begumpura. The society would be free from the segregated and secluded geographies of domination and everyone would be absolutely free to move around without restrictions imposed by caste prejudices. In other words, the evil of untouchability would cease to exist in the city of Begumpura. Though Begumpura was a utopian city envisaged by the bhakti radical, Guru Ravidass, it was not a mere figment of his mind, a fantasy or an ecstasy. In the opinion of Gail Omvedt, '[e]cstasy arises because of the hope and fervent emotion aroused by the possibility of a utopian society, a society of equality and love'.[151] But the city of Begumpura was based on a critical understanding of the socio-economic and political conditions prevailing during the

[149] Balmurli Natrajan, 'The Liberation Theologists of the Hindu Past', http://himalmag.com/component/search/?searchword=Balmurli+Natrajan&ordering=newest&searchphrase=all&limit=20&areas[0]=content [accessed 23 March 2011].

[150] The term 'subaltern state' needs some clarification. Given the binary opposition between sovereign and subaltern, can a sovereign state be called subaltern? Since the term subaltern implies an existence on the margins, would it be appropriate to designate a sovereign state with the prefix of subaltern? What I mean by subaltern state is a promised/utopian/aspired sovereign space inhabited by the socially excluded sections of a society who would not only cease to exist as subjects but also assume the status of masters. It is in this context that the utopia of Begumpura comes to identify with the subaltern state in terms of the transformed and elevated status of its inhabitants. Subalterns in India, argues Gail Omvedt, 'have to be defined not simply in 'class' or economic terms, but also in caste terms'. See, Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, pp. 7, 23.

[151] Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, p. 10.

lifetime of Guru Ravidass, similar to what Gail Omvedt described as utopia based on reason against ecstasy.[152] Guru Ravidass lived during a period when foreign rulers, along with the members of higher castes, doubly oppressed the lower castes.[153] He had no hope whatsoever from any quarter regarding the betterment of the conditions of the downtrodden. In one of his hymns he says: *Dardu dekh sab ko hasai, aaisee dasaa hamaaree. Ast dasaa sidi kar talai, sab kirpa tumhari* (Everyone laughs seeing my poverty, such is my state. The eighteen perfections are in the palm of my hands, all through Your grace).[154] In fact, the entire poetry of Guru Ravidass echoed a loud protest against slavery on the one hand, and boundless love and devotion to the formless God on the other. He proclaimed that God created all human beings as equals and resided equally in all of them. If the same God pervaded the entire humanity, then it is foolish, argued Guru Ravidass, to divide the society on the basis of caste. He thus condemned the division of mankind on the basis of caste. He said, *Jo ham shehri so meet hamara* (whoever is my fellow citizen, is my friend).[155] It is in this context that the utopian Dalit Raj or the city of Begumpura based on *dhyan* and *bhakti/bhav* (reason and devotional love)[156] and articulated in the form of poetry becomes an icon of the emerging Dalit agenda in Punjab. How the Ad Dharm movement of Punjab has been able to carry forward this twin task of the revival of the lost native religion of the Dalits of Punjab and its projection as a central concern of the emerging Dalit agenda is the main focus of the next section.

Chiselling the alternative agenda

The Ad Dharm movement, well known for introducing a new element of Dalit politics in Punjab in the form of a separate Dalit identity, provided a systematic framework for sharpening the

[152] 'Reason, in the words of Omvedt, defines the road to utopia; it analyzes the current situation of society and shows the strategy needed to realize a better one'. See Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, p. 11.

[153] Singh, *The Study of Bhakta Ravidasa*, p. 99; see also Karam Singh Raju, 'Beghampura Sehar Ko Naun' (There is a City named Beghampura), in Usha Khanna (ed.), *Relevance of Guru Ravidas's Philosophy in the Present Millennium*, Jalandhar: Shri Guru Ravidass Foundation India, 2001, pp. 141–147.

[154] Adi Granth, p. 858.

[155] Adi Granth, p. 345.

[156] For details see, Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, p. 272.

dormant dimensions of the above-discussed alternative Dalit agenda. This movement aimed at carving out a separate Dalit identity, independent of the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, by reminding the Dalits that they had actually possessed three powers, namely 'qaumiat' (communal pride), 'mazhab' (religion) and 'majlis' (organization) which subsequently were denied to them under the rubric of the hegemonic Brahminical social order. It urged them to come forward and assert their separate identity based on their native Dalit worldview. This is what distinguishes the Ad Dharm movement from that of the radical separatism (conversion) of the Ambedkarite, and the cultural assimilation (sanskritisation) drive of the Arya Samaji genre. In other words, this movement focused more on ethnification of Dalit identity than on following the tested paths of sanskritisation or religious conversion.[157] The ingenuity of the Ad Dharm movement further lies in the fact that it attempted to transform different Dalit castes of Punjab into what Hardtmann described as 'Dalit counterpublic'.[158]

It was the only movement of its kind in the Northwestern region of the country that aimed at securing a respectable space—the promised land of Begumpura—for Dalits by seeking separate Dalit identity through religious regeneration, cultural transformation and political assertion, in contrast to the traditional medium of social mobility through conversion and sanskritisation. Although, this movement became somewhat dormant after the first general election in independent India, the distinct markers of Dalit identity that it had been successfully chiselled in the course of the long struggle continues to shape the nature and thrust of the alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab even today.

[157] For details see: Kanchan Chandra, 'Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh: The Ethnification of the Party System and its Consequences', in Ramashray Roy and Paul Wallace (eds), *Indian Politics and the 1998 Election: Regionalism, Hindutva, and State Politics*, New Delhi: Sage, 1999, pp. 56–59; Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, p. 149; Ram, 'Untouchability in India with a Difference', p. 900.

[158] Dalit counterpublic refers to an inclusive intrapublic (within a Dalit public) Dalit sphere where differences are expressed and debated. 'Interpublic relations, on the other hand, are built on the premises that the Dalit activists are excluded from the debates in the public sphere, that they are silenced in a unilateral way and for that reason have formed their own public'. See Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement*, pp. 2–3.

Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia: the key architect of the alternative agenda

Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia,[159] a renowned revolutionary and founder of the Ad Dharm Movement, was the key figure behind the articulation of an alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab. The strategy that he deployed to achieve this ambitious goal revolved around the tasks of spiritual regeneration, cultural transformation and socio-economic emancipation of the lower castes. He was not in favour of deploying conversion as a strategy to contest social exclusion. Nor did he advocate assimilation of the Dalits into the preponderant cultural milieu of the alien Aryans. Instead, he was of the firm opinion that since Dalits were not born as Hindus, the question of abjuring Hinduism does not arise at all. Moreover, since Hinduism had been raised on the debris of Ad Dharm, the native faith of the indigenous people of Punjab, the Dalits of Punjab need not follow into the footsteps of the cultural patterns of a religion that was imposed on them by the alien Aryans. He strongly argued that the ex-Untouchables were neither Hindus, nor Sikhs, nor Christians nor Muslims.[160] On the contrary, they happened to be the original inhabitants of this ancient land called 'Hind' and their

[159] Mangoo Ram was born on 14 January 1886 in a *Chamar* family in the village of Mugowal, District Hoshiarpur, Punjab. His father had a business selling hides. In 1909, he immigrated to America where he came in close contact with the *Gadhar Party* (a militant nationalist organization). On his return home in 1925, he organized the Depressed Classes against the system of untouchability and founded the Ad Dharm movement. In January 1928, he led a deputation of 150 prominent Ad Dharmis to the Simon commission and gave a memorandum for equal rights for the Depressed Classes. In 1932, he also met the Lothian Committee at Lahore asserting that Dalits were neither Sikhs, Hindus, Christians nor Muslims. He reiterated that they were, in fact, the indigenous people of India whose religion was Ad Dharm. He also sent telegrams during the Roundtable Conferences in London (1930–1932) pledging Ad dharm support for Dr B. R. Ambedkar as the leader of the Untouchables in India instead of Mahatama Gandhi. In 1946, he was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly and remained in office until 1952. On 25 July 1976, he was invited as a Chief guest by Ad Dharm Brotherhood, United Kingdom, at the Ad Dharm Golden Jubilee Celebrations. Ad Dharm Brotherhood (UK) honoured him with a pension of Rs. 100 per month which he received till his death. On 15 August, 1972, Indira Gandhi, the then Prime minister of India, honoured him with a *Tamra Patra* and a pension of Rs. 200 per month for services rendered in the *Gadhar Party* during India's struggle for freedom. He died on 22 April 1980. For details see, Chanan Lal Manak, 'Krantikari Aagoo: Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia Atey Ad Dharm Lehar' [Revolutionary Leader: Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia and Ad Dharm Movement], in *Souvenir: Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia 99th Birth Anniversary*, New Delhi: 41, Kundan Nagar, 1985, p. 6; Chattar Sain, 'Ghadri Taun Ad Dharmi: Babu Mangoo Ram Ji Mugowalia', in *Souvenir Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia*, p. 37.

[160] Ad Dharm Report, p. 42 (Ad Dharmi Commandment 48).

native religion was Ad Dharm—the oldest of all religions. According to him, Hindus were not the natives of the land. They came from outside, subjugated the local people and tried to completely erase their indigenous religion and cultures.

In a poster announcing the first annual meeting of the Ad Dharm movement, Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia made a fervent appeal to all the different Dalit castes (then termed as 'Depressed Classes') to come forward on a common platform and fight for the eradication of untouchability in Punjab. While addressing the various communities belonging to ex-Untouchable castes—Chamars, Chuhras, Sansis, Bhanjhras, Doms, Julahas, Meghs, Ghadhilias, Mahashas, Ravidassis, and Kabirpanthis—as brothers, Mangoo Ram Mugowalia argued:

> We are the real inhabitants of this country and our religion is Ad Dharm.... We are the progeny of kings; Hindus came down from Iran to Hind and destroyed our qaum.... We are seven crores (seventy millions) in numbers and are registered as Hindus in this country. Liberate the Adi race by separating these seven crores.... Never consider ourselves as Hindus at all, remember that our religion is Ad Dharm.

N. Shivraj also expressed similar views during his presidential address at the Maharashtra Untouchable Youths conference held at Poona on 12–13 January 1936. He was of the opinion that 'The only way to get rid of untouchability is that the Depressed Classes should leave Hindu religion not necessarily by conversion to another religion already existing but possibly by starting a new religion, or by reviving the ancient one practiced among the Adi-Dravidas, long before the Aryans brought to India Hinduism with its various customs'.[161] The obvious message conveyed in the poster, in the form of an appeal, outlined at the same time the main contours of the emerging alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab. It aimed to restore the dignity and freedom of the indigenous peoples who stood categorized into different castes and religious groups. Mangoo Ram argued that a permanent solution to the plight of the downtrodden indigenous people of the country was possible only through the restoration of their lost native religious and cultural heritage. The retrieved native religion in turn, he believed, would facilitate the formation of a separate Dalit identity, resulting in the restoration of the lost Dalit glory in the region and beyond.

[161] For details see, Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 261.

The task of revivification of the lost indigenous religion, however, was made cumbersome by the fact that during the alleged long period of persecution at the hands of the caste Hindus, the Untouchables had not only forgotten their cultural heritage and their gurus but had also come to believe that the religion of the invaders was their own. Strictly forbidden to cultivate an aspiration for a separate faith, the Untouchables were further condemned as profane and declared unfit to have their own independent religion. Thus to revive Ad Dharm was tantamount to developing altogether a new religion for Dalits. The Ad Dharm leadership was successful in its objective of reviving the native religion of the Dalits by getting it recognized from the British government as a fully-fledged religion of the downtrodden. Consequently a total of 418,789 persons reported themselves as Ad Dharmis in the Punjab census of 1931. It was for the first time in the history of lower castes that such a large number of them had come forward to officially declare themselves as separate and independent of the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. This was, perhaps, the beginning of the radical Dalit assertion in North India. It got further shot in the arm in the first provincial election that took place in 1936 after the promulgation of the Government of India Act of 1935. The Ad Dharm Mandal of Punjab contested election in all eight reserved seats and won seven of them. Similarly, in the 1946 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections on the eve of independence, the Ad Dharm also registered its presence by contesting in alliance with the Unionist Party. Mangoo Ram was declared elected from the Hoshiarpur reserved constituency.

Ad Dharm for Mangoo Ram was what neo-Buddhism was for Ambedkar. If for Ambedkar the Mahars of Maharashtra were once Buddhists, the Dalits of Punjab for Mangoo Ram were Ad Dharmis. However, for Mangoo Ram, Dalits of Punjab includes all the different lower castes whereas Dr Ambedkar's appeal was exclusively for Mahars . It did not include Chambars and Mangs, the other two main Dalit castes in Maharashtra. Ad Dharm, the native religion of Dalits, eventually became the central theme of the emerging alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab.

Spiritual regeneration, cultural transformation and socio-economic emancipation

Ad Dharm constitutes the core of the emerging alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab. It is both a nomenclature of the religion of the

natives and the title of the famous Dalit movement (Ad Dharm movement) in the state. As a religion, Ad Dharm became the central concern of the Dalit movement, aiming to forge a distinct identity for the socially excluded natives of Punjab. It figures prominently in the famous 'Report of the Ad Dharm Mandal, 1926–1931' (Ad Dharm Report) prepared and published in Urdu by the Ad Dharm Mandal, Jullundur (now 'Jalandhar') on 15 May 1931.[162] As a religion, Ad Dharm came to coalesce with the identity formation process of the Ad Dharm movement in the state. It is in this context that Ad Dharm as a religion and as a movement came to dominate the emerging Dalit space (counterpublic Dalit sphere) in pre-partition Punjab. Although Ad Dharm as a political movement petered out in post-partition Punjab, as a religion of the downtrodden as well as a counterpublic Dalit sphere it continues to flourish even today. It is in fact pursued far more vigorously among the Punjabi diasporas in Europe and North America, who have been able to establish a solid system of social networking across the globe. Moreover, Ad Dharm as a religion continues to flourish in the premises of a large number of Ravidass deras in Punjab and abroad.

As a religion of the natives of Punjab, Ad Dharm assumed critical importance in the early 1920s. In fact, it was during this time that various socio-religious movements made frantic efforts to win over the downtrodden. The main agenda of various social reform and religious organizations was to hammer out an independent space in the then evolving electoral number game by winning over the fluid and floating Dalit population to their side. None of such organizations was actually interested in the empowerment and social uplift of the Dalits. It is the Ad Dharm movement that ultimately came forward to project Dalits

[162] Mark Juergensmeyer translated the Ad Dharm Report into English with the assistance of Surjit Singh Goraya and Hassan Hamdani. The translation of the entire report is available in his, 'Political Hope: The Social Movements of North India's Untouchables, 1900–1970', Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1974. A major part of the report is also included in Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, pp. 290–308. Juergensmeyer has retained the pagination of the original report in Urdu in the translated version. C. L. Chumber translated the report into Hindi in 2000, published as 'Report of the Ad Dharm Mandal, 1926–1931 (trans. in Hindi), *Saptahik Adi-Dharmi Parveshank*, 2000, 11 June, pp. 1–54). The Hindi translations include the names of the 500 members of the Ad Dharm Mandal and 55 missionaries. All references to the report in this essay hereafter are from Juergensmeyer's translation and the pagination refers to the original Urdu report as cited in Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*.

as a separate *qaum*[163] with a distinct social identity and rich religious heritage. Under the leadership of Babu Mangoo Ram, the movement decided to prevent Dalits from falling prey to the strategic designs of the various upper caste social reform organizations by providing them with an alternative social and political platform from which to compete independently for their own genuine civic rights. The Ad Dharm movement had come to realise that the only way to liberate the Dalits of Punjab from the shackles of social exclusion was to relocate and institutionalize their native religion (Ad Dharm) rather than to make them an appendage to the so-called upper caste/dominant caste social reform organizations.

The Ad Dharm Report clearly mentioned that every Ad Dharmi is expected to be proud of his/her native religion and to propagate its basic tenets.[164] Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia worked hard towards the herculean task of compiling a separate sacred text of the Ad Dharm, comprising the bani of its patron, Sant Ravidass, and various other Dalit Sants on the pattern of already existing mainstream religious Holy Scriptures in the region. For this purpose, he approached two famous Ravidass religious centres of his time (Dera Chak Hakim near Phagwara and Dera Sachkhand Ballan near Jalandhar).[165] Sant Pipal Dass of Dera Sachkhand Ballan and Sant Hiran Dass of Dera Chak Hakim '...were charged to fashion a body of scripture for the Ad Dharm under the title 'Sri Guru Ad Prakash Asankh Deep Granth' (The Lord's Original Scriptures of Infinite Light), but for most of the movement's history this document remained only a name'.[166] However, in the mean time, 'Rae Das Ki Bani', a collection of the poetry of Guru Ravidass and the verses of Sant Hiran Das, published by the Allahabad: Belvedere press in 1908 by the latter, came to be considered as the religious text of the Ad Dharm.[167] Later on, Sant Isher Dass of village Nandgarh of District Hoshiarpur, Punjab compiled the holy book of the Ad Dharm entitled 'Ad Prakash'

[163] An Urdu word derived from Persian and loosely translated as 'nation', 'people', or 'community'.

[164] That Nature (Qudrat Ka Mela)/God (Ishwar/Adi Purkh) is one; all humans are equal and are governed by moral behaviour (Karm-dharm), which is also created by Nature.

[165] For details see, Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, p. 85.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid., pp. 85, 87.

('The Original Light').[168] Ad Prakash Granth contains 1,248 pages, which include hymns of Guru Ravidass, Maharishi Valmiki, and Kabir, as well as many other Adi Gurus. For the first time the Manorma electronic press published its 500 copies in 1983. It is important to note that the title 'Ad Prakash' was chosen by the leaders of the Ad Dharm movement.[169] In the aftermath of the Vienna attack, 'Ad Prakash' has once again come into the limelight, resulting in the publication of around 2,000 copies of its Punjabi and Hindi editions.[170]

The compilation of sacred scriptures of the Ad Dharm was, in fact, an important step towards the systematization of the Ravidassia/Ad Dharmi Qaum. Mangoo Ram expressed his will to his close associates that on his death couplets from the sacred 'Ad Prakash' should be recited so that his death rituals could not be usurped by any mainstream religion to the disadvantage of the emerging alternative Dalit theology and philosophy meticulously groomed under his leadership.[171] His will was fulfilled.[172] Since then Ad Prakash is referred to, at least among the Ad Dharmis, as the religious text of the Ravidassia community and has also emerged as a vision of alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab. Devotional reading of sacred scriptures of Ad Prakash and acting upon its precepts becomes the foremost duty of every Ad Dharmi as emphasized in the Ad Dharm Report. The report urged that every Ad Dharmi needs to be a missionary for the faith and is expected to remember Guru Dev for half an hour each morning or evening. It is also expected that every boy and girl will perform such duties after the age of five.[173] In order to strengthen the separate social identity of the Ad Dharmi community its members were asked to celebrate the festivals of Adi gurus and to follow their faith meticulously.[174] As a separate faith, Ad Dharm expects every Ad Dharmi to conduct the marriage ceremonies according to its distinct rituals. Ad Dharmis should marry only Ad Dharmis, but if someone does marry an outsider, he or she should be brought into the fold

[168] For details see, Banta Ram and Joginder Bains, 'Ad Dharm, Ad Prakash Granth, Ad Dharmi Qaum', *Souvenir, Babu Mangoo Ram*, pp. 19–20. Also based on personal Interview with Chanan Lal Manak, Jalandhar, 1 May 2001.

[169] Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels*, p. 52.

[170] Punjabi Tribune (Chandigarh), 7 July 2009.

[171] Interview with Chanan Lal Manik, 1 May 2001.

[172] Interview with Chatter Sain, son of Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia, Garshankar (District Hoshiarpur), 27 April 2001.

[173] Ad Dharm Report, pp. 39–40.

[174] Ibid.

of the faith.[175] Ad Dharmis are not supposed to follow any other law except their own, and they should call themselves as such and register in the census as 'Ad Dharmi'.[176] In order to clearly distinguish themselves from Hindus and other communities, the followers of the movement were asked to use the red colour (the colour of their ancestors) as a marker of their distinct identity.[177] The Ad Dharm Report further emphasized that anyone who violates the laws of the Ad Dharm or of the guru, or insults these laws in one way or another, will be liable to punishment. In some cases the violator could even be excommunicated. The Report further mentioned in unambiguous terms that the essential teachings of the Ad Dharm will always remain the same and no one dare challenge or change them.[178] The Ad Dharmis were asked to boycott and abandon books such as the Laws of Manu, other granths and sastras, which were alleged to have created the problem of untouchability and had led to discrimination against the ex-Untouchables.[179] All such commandments seem to be intended to construct Ad Dharm as a separate religion of the Dalits of Punjab.

The alternative Dalit agenda articulated by the Ad Dharm movement was not only confined to constructing a separate religion for the Dalits, it was also concerned with their cultural transformation and socio-economic empowerment. It made a substantial contribution towards improving the socio-cultural conditions of the Dalits in Punjab. It tried to generate awareness among them by bringing a cultural transformation in their personal lives while saving them from falling into the traps of sanskritisation and conversion. It aimed at creating a social and cultural awakening among the downtrodden by making them aware of their incarcerated life within the oppressive boundaries of the Varna order. It also revealed the debilitating impact of the various social evils on the downtrodden and called upon them to get rid of them as quickly as possible.[180] For the economic

[175] Ibid., p. 40.
[176] Ibid., p. 42.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid., p. 37.
[179] Ibid., p. 12.
[180] Some of the major social evils that every Ad Dharmi is expected to avoid at all costs, as integral to the pursuit of alternative Dalit agenda, are as follows: Ad Dharmis should abstain from intoxicants, gambling, theft, fraud, lies, dishonesty, adultery; abandon idolatry and should not believe in magic, ghosts, or anything of the sort; abandon expensive marriage, money for a bride and practice of child marriage; give equal importance to the birth of both boys and girls; not to cry and beat oneself at a death or funeral; not to eat the meat of a dead animal or bird; no discrimination

empowerment of the Dalits, the Ad Dharm movement emphasized the economic rights (including land ownership rights) of Dalits on a par with others and also demanded proper representation in all the government departments and legislative bodies.[181] It further encouraged the Ad Dharmis to open shops and businesses in every village so that they can get rid of the oppressive patron-client relationship that made them subservient to the dominant castes in the rural setting of Punjab.[182]

Ravidass Deras, alternative agenda and conflict formation

It is important to note at the outset here that, although the Achhut Federation[183] and the Republican Party of India emerged in the wake of the Ad Dharm movement, it was the Ravidass deras that became the major carriers of its legacy. Interchangeably known as gurughars, temples, gurdwaras, and deras, Ravidass deras began emerging in Punjab in the early twentieth century. A vernacular field study completed in 2003 puts their number around one hundred.[184] Since the publication of this study many more such deras have come into existence in Punjab.[185] Paramjit Judge and Gurpreet Bal in their empirical study reported that the number of Ravidass deras has reached 176.[186] The phenomenon of Ravidass deras, as mentioned earlier, is not confined to Punjab alone; it has become equally popular overseas as well. Punjabi Dalit diasporas have established their separate Ravidass deras abroad in large numbers. Some of the most prominent Ravidass deras abroad are in the following cities: Vancouver, Calgary, Brampton, Toronto, Montreal (Canada), New York, Sacramento, Pittsburg, Seattle, Fresno, Fremont, Houston, Selma, and Austin (United States), Wolverhampton, Birmingham,

in regard to eating with other castes; and all Ad Dharmis should forget notions of caste and untouchability and work towards the unity of the whole of mankind. See, Ad Dharm Report, pp. 37–42.

[181] Ibid., pp. 13–14.

[182] Ibid., p. 42.

[183] Punjab version of All India Scheduled Castes Federation founded by Dr Ambedkar.

[184] Som Nath Bharti Qadian, *Jagat Guru Ravidass Sampradaya Sant Te Sadhna Sthal* (Sants and Deras of World Guru Ravidass Panth), Jalandhar: Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan, 2003.

[185] Ram, 'Ravidass Deras and Social Protest', p. 1343.

[186] Judge and Bal, *Mapping Dalits*, p. 106.

Bradford, Coventry, Derby, Lancaster, Southall, Southampton, Kent and Bedford (United Kingdom). In the last few years many Ravidass temples and gurdwaras have also been built in Austria, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Holland, New Zealand, Greece and the Lebanon.[187] It is pertinent to note that Ravidass deras have emerged not merely as centres of spiritual gatherings for Dalits but have also metamorphosed slowly into epicentres of social protest.

Ravidass deras devised their own separate rituals, ceremonies, slogans, ardas (prayer), kirtan (musical rendering of sacred hymns), religious festivals and iconography. Since the entire gamut of religious and cultural activities in Ravidass deras revolve around the teachings and life of Guru Ravidass, he emerges as the central figure in the premises of these deras. Ravidass idols are installed and worshipped in the *sanctum sanctorum* of almost all such deras and his sacred figure is elevated to the status of a Guru. Guruship is also bestowed upon the head priests of the Ravidass deras, popularly known as *Gaddi Nashins*. Calendar posters printed in the image of Guru Ravidass decorate the walls of the premises of these Deras. In Sikh gurdwaras idol worshipping and touching the feet of human Guru is an anathema. And in the Hindu temples, though idols images of innumerable gods and goddesses are worshipped, the idol of Guru Ravidass is conspicuous by its absence.

Ravidass deras represent a critical Dalit space where bhakti-based tradition of social protest, propounded and practiced by Guru Ravidass, gets finely blended with that of the *political* spearheaded by Dr Ambedkar. In Ravidass deras the ecstasy and reason of the song of the utopia of Begumpura, as envisaged by Guru Ravidass in the early modern period, perfectly fits with the analytical resonances of the Prabuddha Bharat of Dr Ambedkar, one of the most popular and reason-based utopias envisioned by dalit-bahujan intellectuals and leaders of the anti-caste movement during the colonial period. The Ravidassia movement in Punjab, in fact, represents what Johannes Beltz, an eminent authority on neo-Buddhism, describes as 'a new terrain of exciting future research'[188] whose potential strength is yet

[187] According to a rough estimate there are 75 Ravidass gurdwaras overseas—twelve in the United Kingdom, eight each in the United States and Italy, six in Canada, and two each in France and Australia. See, http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090622/edit.htm (Accessed 23 March 2011).

[188] Beltz, 'Introduction', p. 11.

to be fully exploited.[189] The present paper is a small beginning in this regard—the emerging field of critical Dalit studies in India.

The phenomenon of Ravidass deras has taken the form of a sort of a new socio-cultural Dalit movement in Punjab—what has also come to be known as the 'Ravidassia movement' or 'Ravidass Deras Dalit movement'.[190] Led by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, one of the most prominent Ravidass Deras in Punjab,[191] this new Dalit socio-cultural movement 'is silently sweeping the Punjab countryside offering a new hope to the untouchable, particularly the Chamars', argues V. T. Rajshekar, editor of the famous weekly, *Dalit Voice*.[192] It has generated a sense of confidence amongst the socially excluded sections of Punjabi society and provided them with an opportunity to exhibit their hitherto eclipsed Dalit identity. The movement of Ravidass deras, argues Rajshekar, '. . .reflects the fast changing socio-cultural scene of Punjab where the once powerful and revolutionary Sikh religion is failing to meet the needs of the oppressed who discovered the right remedy to cure their wounded psyche in the Ballan experiment'.[193] The secret of the success of this movement, perhaps, lies in an excellent strategy based on close interaction between the two rich subaltern traditions: the north-Indian radical bhakti

[189] Lum, 'Face to Faith'.

[190] Lum, 'Face to Faith'.

[191] Dera Sachkhand Ballan, also known as Dera Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Ji or simply Dera Ballan, is situated at village Ballan, around 12 kilometres north of Jalandhar city on the Pathankot road in Doaba Punjab. This Dera has become a paragon of the Ravidass movement in Northwest India. It has a library on its premises, publishes a tri-lingual weekly (*Begumpura Shaher*), distributes free Dalit literature, honours Dalit scholars, runs a model school, and a hospital for the service and uplift of the downtrodden. It plays a pivotal role in constituting and disseminating new religious and ritual practices for Dalits in Punjab and overseas. All this helped significantly in the formation of a separate Dalit identity in the state. Of all the major contributions that the Dera Ballan has made, the construction of a mammoth Temple of Shri Guru Ravidass's Birthplace at Seer Goverdhanpur in the vicinity of Varanasi city is the most significant. This temple has become a centre of pilgrimage for Dalits across the state of Punjab and overseas. Recently non-resident Indian followers of Dera Ballan from Europe and North America donated 15 Kg of Pure Gold for the purpose of making a palanquin of Guru Ravidass, which the Saints of Dera Ballan carried in the form of a mammoth procession from the premises of the Dera Ballan to Sri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple at Seer Govardhanpur (Varanasi). The procession started from Dera Ballan on 16 February and reached Varanasi in the evening of 20 February 2008 (based on a personal communication with one of the participants in the procession; see also Rozana Spokesman, 17 February 2008.

[192] V. T. Rajshekar, 'A Silent Socio-Cultural Revolution Sweeps Punjab: Ravidass Saints gain Millions of Followers'. *Dalit Voice* (Bangalore), 2004 (23), July, p. 3.

[193] Rajshekar, 'A Silent Socio-Cultural Revolution', p. 3.

movement and neo-Buddhism. The Sants of Ravidass deras, again, particularly of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, have been quite successful in blending together the bani of Guru Ravidass and the philosophy of neo-Buddhism as propounded by Dr Ambedkar.[194] Dera Sachkhand Ballan has become a paragon of the Ravidass movement in northwest India. It has also been regulating the affairs of various Ravidass Deras overseas through its international trusts.[195] It has made concerted efforts towards the construction of a separate Dalit identity since coming into existence at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Ravidass Deras and a separate Dalit identity

Ravidass deras are not merely a religious space. They do, in fact, symbolize a meticulous ongoing process of concretization of a separate Dalit identity. Their central concern has been to present themselves as different from the Hindu and Sikh shrines and to provide an alternative religious domain whereby their followers, belonging to the so-called low caste populace, need not hide their identity and meekly suffer the onslaught of social exclusion. Their distinctiveness also lies in the fact that they neither take refuge in any of the established theology nor do they present themselves as emulating the dominant socio-cultural ethos of upper caste society. On the contrary, they proudly distinguish themselves from the mainstream religious systems and also contest their long-imposed supremacy over the Dalits of Punjab. The manner in which they distinguish themselves from others and the extent to which they have been successful in this regard is the key concern of the remaining part of this section.

The figure of Ravidass, as mentioned above, is worshipped as a Guru in Ravidass Deras. In addition, the *gaddi nashins* (heads) of Ravidass deras are also revered as Gurus. The prefix of Guru before Ravidass

[194] Nirmal Ambedkari, 'Dera Sach Khand Ballan Dae Manjil Whal Vadde Kadam' (The Surging Steps of Dera Sach Khand Ballan towards its Destination). *Begumpura Shaher* (weekly, Jalandhar), May 2005, Vol. 2, p. 5.

[195] Dera Sachkhand Ballan has established the following international charitable trusts abroad for dissemination of the *Bani* of Ravidass amongst the Dalit Diaspora: Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [United Kingdom]; Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [Vancouver Canada]; and Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [United States]. All these trusts are managed mostly by non-resident Indian Dalits from the Doaba region of Punjab who constitute a big diasporic community (Ravidassia samaj) of the devotees of Guru Ravidass and the followers of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan.

and the heads of Ravidass Deras separated them from Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples. In Sikh religion only ten historic Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib are considered the only legitimate Gurus. The tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh, puts the tradition of human Guruship to an end and the institution of guruship is permanently endowed in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Since then human guruship has remained an anathema in Sikh religion. Thus in Sikh gurudwaras, Ravidass is addressed as 'Bhakta' and not as 'Guru'. The issue of Bhakta *versus* Guru has not only pitted the Ravidassia community and Jat Sikhs against each other in Punjab and elsewhere, but has also led to communal polarization between the Sikh and Dalit diasporas as well.

Another key factor that underlines the assertion of a separate identity by the Ravidass deras is the distinct nomenclature preferred by its priests—distinguishing them from their counterparts in Sikh shrines, especially since the formation of the Khalsa in 1699. The titles of the last names of the Sants of Ravidass Deras are 'Dass' (humble). It seems they have inherited the tradition of suffixing 'Dass' from their Guru Ravidass whose first name is also suffixed with 'Dass'. Whereas the titles of first names of Sikhs are invariably followed by 'Singh'.[196] Though the Sants of Ravidass deras keep unshorn hair and flowing beard, and don turban, like that of the Sikh priests, they still do not consider themselves as Sikhs. Even some of the heads of Ravidass deras were/are clean-shaven.

'Har' (Supreme Being),[197] the insignia of Ravidass deras, known as 'Koumi Nishan' of the Ravidassia samaj, is yet another distinct identity marker that endows them with a separate identity. The religious symbol of the Sikh gurdwaras is 'Khanda' (Two-edged sword over

[196] The title 'Singh' became popular among the Sikhs after the formation of the Khalsa in 1699. Before that the names of all the Sikh Gurus were not followed by the title 'Singh'.

[197] However, the earlier insignia of the Ad Dharm Mandal of 1926 as well as of the All India Adi Dharam Mission (Regd.) of 1960 was *Sohang*. The Sants of Dera Ballan changed it into *Har* with the approval of the Ravidass Sadhu Sampradaya of Punjab, Ravidass Deras, and the various Guru Ravidass *Sabhas* (Committees) both within India and abroad. It was registered under the Copyright Act 1957, Government of India vide registration no. A48–807/87/CO dated 6 March 1987. Though the insignia *Har* has become an acceptable symbol of the entire Ravidasia community in Punjab and abroad, but some of the temples abroad (Shri Guru Ravidass Temple Pittsburg [California]) still adhered to the old insignia of *Sohang* or display both the insignia on their (Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha, New York) letter pads. Based on field notes of 25 May–3 June 2008.

a quoit with two crossed sabers below the quoit) and of Hindu temples is a trident and also holy image of various gods and goddesses. The insignia 'Har' is composed of a Sun-like circle with an image of 40 rays on its circular edge. The 40 rays around the circle of the insignia signify 40 hymns of Guru Ravidass. Within the circle, there is another smaller circle within which 'Har' is inscribed in Gurmukhi script with a sign of flame on the top of it. The flame represents the 'Naam' (word) that would illuminate the entire world. The sign of flame crosses over into the bigger circle. In between the bigger and smaller circles is written a couplet: *Naam tere kee jot lagayi, Bhaio Ujiaaro Bhawan saglaare* (Your Name is the flame I light; it has illuminated the entire world). This inner circle couplet is taken from one of the 40 hymns of Guru Ravidass. The insignia 'Har' represents the very being of Ravidass and his teachings. The insignia 'Har' is chosen after the name of their Guru [Ravi (Sun) dass (servant), servant of the sun]. The Dalits, especially the Chamars of Punjab, proudly hoist flags with the image of 'Har' atop their religious places, and vehicles during processions on the occasions of Guru Ravidass birth anniversaries and other festivities and raise slogans such as 'Ravidass Shakti Amar Rahe' (long live the grace of Ravidass). The insignia 'Har' has become a distinct marker of a separate Dalit identity. It is also being circulated in the form of souvenirs, stickers and wall calendars printed in the image of Guru Ravidass.

The format of the ardas (a formal prayer recited at most Sikh rituals) performed in the Ravidass Deras also differentiates them from that of Sikh religion.[198] It comprises a Shloka (couplet) and one of the 40

[198] *Ardas* is the Punjabi version of the Persian *arz-dasht* (a written petition). In common usage it meant a deferential request. It became an integral part of Sikh religion during the eighteenth century when Guru Govind Singh embellished it with invocation to the blessings of God and the first nine Gurus. Later, his own name was also added to it. During the twentieth century the *Tat Khalsa* (militant wing of Singh Sabha) made further additions to its content by incorporating the past trials and triumphs of the Khalsa and references to the sacrifices made by the Sikhs for the reform of Gurdwaras. (The first Singh Sabha was founded in 1873 in Amritsar. Another branch was formed in Lahore in 1879. The Amritsar branch came to be known as Singh Sabha of Sanatan Sikhs and the Lahore branch as Tat Khalsa). The *Ardas* was ultimately printed in 'Sikh Rahit Maryada' (Sikh Code of Conduct). It is recited at the conclusion of different ceremonies. Led by a Sikh (male/female), the *Ardas* is followed by the entire congregation. Thus in Sikh religion, *Ardas* has become standardized and the same is recited on all occasions at religious, public and private congregations. For details see W. H. McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 39–40, 198–199; Ramesh Chander Dogra

hymns of Guru Ravidass.[199] The ardas closes with the utterance: 'Bole So Nirbhay, Sri Guru Ravidass Maharaj Ki Jai' (Fearless is the one who utters: Victory to Shri Guru Ravidass). Whereas, in the Sikh religion the ardas concluded with: 'Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal' (Blessed is the one who utters: True is the Immortal One). The reference to Nirbhay (fearless) in the conclusion of the ardas of the Ravidass deras has become a central motif of the Dalit consciousness, and is thus not only symptomatic of the historical oppression of the Dalits at the hands of the upper castes, but is also reflective of their determined willingness to confront it head-on.

Like the ardas, the aarti (a Hindu ceremony of adoration which consists of waving round the head of an idol on a platter containing five burning wicks) that is offered at the altar of the sanctum sanctorum of Ravidass deras differentiate them from that of Hindu temples.[200] The

and Urmila Dogra, *The Sikh World: An Encyclopaedic Survey of Sikh Religion and Culture.* New Delhi: UBSPD, 2003, pp. 31–32.

[199] The *Shalok* is: *Har so heera chhadh kai karih aan kee aas. Te nar dojak jaahige Sat bhaakhai Ravidass* (Those who renounce a diamond like Hari [God] and pin their hopes on others, Shall go to hell—this is the truth, says Ravidass). The hymn is: *Nam Tero Aarti Majan Muraray, Har Ke Naam Bin Jhuthey Sagal Pasarey, Nam Tero Assno Nam Tero Ursa, Nam Tero Kesro Le chhitkarey, Nam Tera Ambhula Nam Tero Chandno, Ghas Japey Nam Le Thujhe Kow Charey, Nam Tera Diwa Nam Tero Bati, Nam Tero Tail Le Mahen Pasarey, Nam Tere ki Jot Lagayi, Bhaio Ujiaaro Bhawan Saglarey, Nam Tero Taga Nam Phool Mala, Bhar Athara Sagal Jutharey, Tero Kiya Tujey Keya Arpou, Nam Tera Tuhi Chawr Dholarey, Das Atha Atu Sathey Charey Khani, Eha Wartan Hai Sagal Sansarey, Kehe Ravidass Nam Tero Aarti, Satnam Hai Har Bhog Tuharey* (refrain Murāri, your Name is my ā*rati* [an act of worship] and my ablutions—without the Name of Hari all affection is false. 1 Your Name is the dais, Your Name is the grinding-stone, Your Name is the saffron I take and sprinkle. Your Name is the water, Your Name is the sandalwood I grind, chanting Your Name I offer to You. 2 Your Name is the lamp, Your Name is the wick, Your Name is the oil I take and pour in it. Your Name is the flame I light, it has illuminated all of the world. 3 Your Name is the thread, Your Name is the flower-garland, all plant-offerings are impure. How can I offer to You that which You have made? Your Name is the fly-whisk I wave over You. 4 The eighteen [*Puranas* <sacred Hindu texts> or sciences, or the *Siddhis* <special powers>], the sixty-eight [places of pilgrimage], the four *khānīs* [four forms of creatures born from water, air, eggs and heat] that is how the world turns around. Ravidass says, Your Name is my *ārati*, the true Name is Your food-offering, Hari). Translation as in Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Ravidas*, pp. 163–164. For clarity, emphasis is put in parenthesis in the translation.

[200] In Sikh Gurdwaras, however, *Aarti* is not performed. Guru Nanak referred to *Aarti* in the hymn *Dhanasari* 3 (Adi Granth: 13). 'The entire cosmos', said he, 'is performing the *Aarti* of a single God. The whole sky is the platter and all the stars are its burning wicks.' See Dalip Singh Deep, *Sadhan Main Ravidasa Sant: Jiwan Ate Vichar* (*Sant Ravidass among the Saints: Life and Thought*), Patiala: Punjabi University. 2001, pp. 44–46.

Sants of Ravidass deras do not wave a platter of burning wicks. They blow conch-shells and rattle gongs, which is followed by a recitation of a hymn from the bani of Ravidass.[201] The salutations in the Ravidass Deras have also been formulated selectively in order to project their separate identity. Every religious community has its own way of greeting. 'Sat Shri Akaal' (True is the Immortal One) is the greeting of the Sikhs. 'Namaste', 'Jai Ram Ji Ki or Jai Sita-Ram' (Victory to Ram or Victory to Sita-Ram) is of the Hindus. Ravidass Deras adopted the greeting: 'Jai Gurudev or Jai Guru Ravidass' (Victory to the divine Guru or Guru Ravidass) to which the reply was 'Dhan Guru Dev' (blessed the divine Guru). The short version of the greetings is 'Jai Santan Di' (Victory to the Saints).[202]

The forms of 'ardas', 'aarti', insignia, and salutations adopted by the Sants of Ravidass deras have thus become distinct markers of a separate Dalit identity that not only differentiate them from other religious communities of the region but also project them as prominent Dalit social and religious sites. The Ravidassia movement, argues Kathryn Lum, 'uses religion as a tool to push for greater social equality. . .while discouraging any affiliation to other religions'.[203] Ravidass Deras, in fact, have become a testing ground for the cultivation of a separate Dalit identity in the form of a 'separate religion based on the bani (sacred scriptures) of Guru Ravidass Ji'.[204] In other words, Ravidass Deras have evolved into a nursery of symbols, icons, signifiers, and narratives of a separate Dalit identity that has helped tremendously in shaping the contour of an alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab.

Ravidass Deras and conflict formation

In the context of an emerging alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab, the rise of Ravidass deras amidst mainstream, dominant Sikh gurdwara culture assumes critical importance. This has led to bitterness, provocation, and even violent clashes between Dalits and dominant castes in the state. The relationship between Dalits and the dominant castes in Punjab continues to be marked by the

[201] Based on participant observation by the author.
[202] Based on participant observation by the author.
[203] Lum, 'Face to Faith'.
[204] Ibid.

contradiction and confrontation between landless agricultural workers and their landlords. However, there are many Dalits in Punjab who have improved their economic conditions by dissociating themselves from their caste occupations as well as distancing themselves from agriculture. They have strengthened their economic position through state affirmative action, hard work, and ventures abroad. Some of them have also established their own small-scale servicing units, and work as carpenters, barbers, blacksmiths, masons and so on. In addition, they have also been politicized to a large extent by the rise of Dalit social and political movements over the years in Punjab. The emergence of various Dalit-dominated deras has further contributed towards the continuing process of Dalit social mobility in the state. All this has not only helped Dalits to improve their economic status but has also liberated them from the subordination of the landed peasantry in the state. This in turn has reinforced existing contradictions between the dominant castes and Dalits who are engaged in a power-struggle in Punjab and has led to a series of violent clashes between them in the past few years. The violent manifestation of Dalit-upsurge in the aftermath of the 2009 Vienna attack, particularly involving the followers of the Ravidass cult, is the most recent case in point.

The attack was launched on the two topmost Sants of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan (headquarters of the Ravidass cult in North India situated in the village of Bal near Jalandhar city) during the sermon ceremony on 24 May 2009 at Guru Ravidass Temple in Vienna-Rudolfsheim, the capital's 15th district near Westbahnholf, one of Vienna's main train stations. The number of persons involved in the attack was reportedly six, who were overpowered by around 200 devotees gathered on the occasion. In the mêlée, around 16 people were reportedly injured. Sant Ramanand, the second-in-command of Dera Ballan, later died of his injuries in the hospital.[205] This incident has been interpreted by some as an attack on the fast emerging distinct Ravidassia Dalit identity: the core of the alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab, that has led to massive sabotage of public property worth thousands of millions of Indian Rupees and a curfew for four days in the state. Surinder Kaur, one of the millions of followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan is quoted as saying, '[t]his is happening to us

[205] Viewed online at: http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2009/05/24/world/AP-EU-Austria-Temple-Shooting.html 5/25/2009 (link no longer available).

because our community is making attempts to uplift itself'.[206] Another devotee of the Dera interprets the recent Dalit upsurge as 'a fight for equality'.[207] He is further quoted as saying that '[t]he dominated community is attempting to rise and the dominant community is fearful of its rise'.[208] Yet another interpretation links the Vienna incident to the violation of the Sikh code of conduct during the spiritual preaching by the Sants of Dera Ballan in the temple over there, which has led to a deviation from the tradition of the 'Prakash of Guru Granth Sahib' at Dera Sachkhand Ballan, a practice followed by many Ravidass Deras both in Punjab and abroad.[209] The antim ardas (last rites) ceremony of the slain Sant Ramanad of the Dera Ballan was performed in the absence of the 'Prakash of Guru Granth Sahib'. In other words, the spontaneous violent reaction to the Vienna attack and the subsequent deviation from the long established tradition of recitation of the bani from the holy scriptures of the Sikh faith has widened the wedge between the Dalits and the dominant castes in Punjab and overseas.[210] The Vienna attack, however, is not an exception. There are some similar cases earlier too where the question of separate Dalit identity had led to violent confrontation between the dominant castes and Dalits in Punjab. The Nirankari-Sikh clash in 1978, the Bhaniarawala conflict in 2001 and the Dera Sacha Sauda dispute in 2007 are a few, but are amongst the most prominent examples of such violent conflicts that have erupted between dominant castes and Dalits in East Punjab.

A steadily rising Dalit assertion against social exclusion and discrimination in Punjab is often interpreted through the idiom of native religion and cultural heritage by Ravidass deras. The crude experience of open as well as subtle indignities suffered by the Dalits in almost all the religions they have embraced in order to evade the scourge of pollution-based social exclusion in Hindu religion, has

[206] Mishra, Vandita, 'Inside Dera Sachkhand', *The Sunday Express*, 31 May 2009, p. 5.

[207] Ibid.

[208] Ibid.

[209] *Punjabi Tribune* (Chandigarh), 19 July, 2009; *Hindustan Times* (Chandigarh), 10 July 2009.

[210] For details see, Shiv Kumar Bawa, '"Adi- Duaare" sthapath Karen de Allan' (Announcement to Establish Adi-Duaare), *Punjabi Tribune*, 19 July 2009; Varinder Singh, 'Birs removed from Guru Ravidas gurdwaras', *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), 11 September 2009; Virinder Singh, 'Ravidasia delegation meets Takht Jathedar', The Tribune, 12 September 2009; Amit Sharma, 'Sikh-Ravidasia ties at a new low in Europe', *The Hindustan Times*, 14 October 2009.

played a major role in pushing them towards Dalit dominated deras, particularly to the Ravidass deras in Punjab. The Ravidass deras not only symbolize assertion of a separate Dalit identity in Punjab, they also underscore the ongoing process of articulation of an alternative Dalit agenda in the state.[211] As argued by Judge and Bal in their recently published empirical study, '[t]he dalit politics has shifted to the Deras and saints who have established themselves as the sole and soul spokesmen (incidentally all such saints are men) of the Dalits, particularly the Ad-dharmis and Chamars'.[212]

The mushrooming growth of Ravidass deras, along with various other kinds of Dalit dominated deras that have emerged over the last few decades, has not only alarmed the mainstream Sikh organizations and the neoconservative Sikh leadership, but has also led to varied disputes relating to claims and counterclaims of the premises, as well as other related properties of these deras of various nomenclatures in Punjab. Dalit dominated deras are often considered as intruders into the hitherto well-guarded territory of the Sikh religious centres, controlled and governed by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, the supreme governing body of the Panth (path or organization). The main source of contention at the surface, however, lies in the emerging separate Dalit identity that these varied deras give rise to in contradistinction to the hegemonic Sikh identity in Punjab. At a deeper level, the deras in fact strike critically at the political economy of the agricultural dominated and gurdwara encircled state of Punjab. Since Dalits constitute almost one-third of the total population of Punjab and many of them, particularly from the Doaba region, are settled abroad, their sheer number makes a big difference to the amount of offerings being received at these deras in Punjab and overseas. This further complicates the contention between the deras and the mainstream Sikh organization responsible both for guarding the vast domain of various Sikh gurdwaras and religion laced politics of the state. The rich offerings made at these deras are often considered by some as a case of cash/currency diversion from the treasury of the mainstream Sikh gurdwaras. The large number of Dalit devotees of such deras also carries serious political implications as religion continues to play a dominant role in electoral politics in Punjab. Thus, besides facilitating the ongoing process of upward social mobility among the Dalit population of Punjab, the rise of Dalit dominated

211 For details See: Ram, 'Ravidass Deras and Social Protest', pp. 1341–1364.
212 Judge and Bal, *Mapping Dalits*, p. 106.

deras has led to social conflicts with the dominant caste, which feels threatened in terms of its exclusive hold on both the political economy of religion and the vote banks. From the perspective of an alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab, the resistance framed in caste-class equation, against the backdrop of the upsurge of Dalit social mobility in Punjab, is a progressive, and not regressive, step towards broadening and deepening Indian democracy. As succinctly pointed out by Amartya Sen, '[t]here is a need for caution, however, for those who believe that invocation of caste in any form in democracy is an evil force. As long as caste is invoked in speaking for a lower caste or uniting it, it is good'.[213]

Conclusion

My key argument in this paper is that given different socio-economic structures in Punjab, and the striking reality of landlessness among Dalits in the state, the agendas of conversion to neo-Buddhism and sanskritisation have failed to strike a cord. As far as conversion to neo-Buddhism is concerned it remains a very low-key affair in Punjab. Whatever little presence it has acquired over the years is more or less confined to occasional gatherings at annual celebrations at the Buddha Viharas. Furthermore, the meager neo-Buddhist Dalit population in the state has failed to liberate itself from the caste shackles.

The story of the pursuit of the agenda of sanskritisation in Punjab, as I have attempted to argue and illustrate in this paper, is no different. Sanskritisation in Punjab is more material than cultural in content. Since land continues to be an important index of 'material well being' in the agrarian state of Punjab, sanskritisation of the lower castes has come to be perceived largely in terms of their coming to possess some tract of land. But that could not be the case with the vast majority of Dalits in Punjab who were historically deprived of the right to own land and continue to be landless even after six decades of independence. Although cultivation of agriculture has ceased to serve as a profitable venture, the ownership of land continues to be the most salient and seductive status symbol in rural Punjab.

Though many Dalits have benefited from constitutional affirmative action, spread of education, social welfare measures and immigration

[213] The Hindu, 16 December 2005.

abroad, a vast majority of them remain 'hopelessly' landless; a reality that continues to cast a dark spell on their social status in the rural economy of Punjab. That land determines social status in rural Punjab is a fact. That less than three per cent of the total area under cultivation land is owned by Dalits is also a fact. Equally palpable and compelling is the fact, however, that Dalits have achieved a significant level of awareness and political consciousness over the last few decades in Punjab, independently of the conversion and sanskritisation agendas, the two most popular models of upward Dalit social mobility in the rest of India.

Another key argument in the paper is that Dalits of Punjab draw heavily on the phenomenon of Guru Ravidass for the construction of a separate Dalit identity, the core of the alternative Dalit agenda. This agenda is based on the narrative of a native religion of the Dalits of Punjab. It links them with their own low caste-fellow Guru Ravidass of the medieval north Indian bhakti movement, who unleashed a frontal attack on the dominant structures of the Brahminical social order while deploying the strategy of bhakti as a vehicle of peaceful social protest. Although the Ad Dharm movement was the originator of the idea of the native religion of the Dalits, providing an initial platform for the articulation of the alternative agenda for the Dalits as a separate qaum, it acquired its concrete shape through the versatile agency of numerous Ravidass deras. These deras also stand out as sites of non-violent social protest where the 'spiritual' and the 'political' are blended dexterously in the sense that these are the only religious centres in Punjab where the political leaders of the community are accorded due respect along with the spiritual figures in the premises of the Ravidass deras. Ravidass deras represent a distinct socio-religious space independent of both Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras where followers of the Ravidassia panth need not submerge or collapse their separate Dalit identity within any other religion, Indic or otherwise, as in the case of conversion to other religions including the neo-Buddhism of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. At the same time it also enables the Dalits to escape from the dominant cultural patterns of the upper/dominant castes that accompany the agenda of sanskritisation.

The paper concludes by illustrating that Ravidass deras have evolved into viable socio-religious sites, enabling the alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab to thrive on distinct identity markers such as religious places, centres of pilgrimage, slogans, salutations, prayers, insignia, traditions, rituals, heroes, festivals, and scared texts. The alternative Dalit agenda empowers the Dalits of Punjab to peacefully contest their

historically entrenched social exclusion and enables them to press for their due share in the local structures of power without compromising their so-called low caste Dalit identity. It also encourages them to flag rather proudly their separate Dalit identity—the central motif of the alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab. The alternative Dalit agenda has in fact turned their so-called low caste identity into a potent weapon of radical Dalit assertion, which has led to various conflicts with the dominant castes in Punjab. It has also raised the possibility of a struggle for better living without discarding one's own cultural heritage and native religion. This clearly distinguishes the emerging patterns of Dalit social mobility in Punjab from the rest of India where the so-called low caste Dalit identity is often concealed either in a cultural assimilation process of sanskritisation or in a radical-separation process of conversion to neo-Buddhism.

The pursuit of empowerment, while refusing to compromise one's own social identity, is what sharply differentiates the articulation and assertion of an alternative Dalit agenda in Punjab from the two most popular Dalit agendas of conversion and sanskritisation as followed in the rest of the country. Looking ahead, it is possible to visualize the articulation of a similar Dalit agenda through highly contentious democratic politics in other parts of the country where the archetypical agendas of conversion and sanskritisation have either failed to deliver social justice and dignity or could not simply appeal to the local Dalit population.